

At the Foot of the Blue Mountains

STORIES BY TAJIK AUTHORS



Raduga
Publishers
Moscow



Until the Great October Revolution of 1917, geographical maps contained no mention of Tajikistan, although this mountainous land washed by the Pyandj and the Syr Darya rivers has been known since times of old. It is inhabited by an industrious people—the Tajiks—who have given the world such famous poets and scholars as the immortal Rudaki and Firdousi, Khayyam and Avicenna.

One of the southernmost republics of the Soviet Union, situated in the southeastern section of Central Asia at the conjunction of two mighty mountain ranges, Tajikistan is a land of sunshine and snowcapped peaks, of narrow mountain gorges with swift-flowing rivers. Cotton, which the people there refer to as "white gold", has brought prosperity to this ancient people. It is an area of great natural contrasts: burning desert sands and green oases, mountain forests and glaciers. In Tajikistan, summer and winter co-exist side by side.

The culture and literature of the people who inhabit this diverse land are as rich and varied as its natural environment. This collection of Tajik stories—mostly of recent vintage—not only presents a variety of problems and character-types but also acquaints the reader with widely differing literary styles from pure and simple realistic prose, classical in form, to poetic writing as florid and rich in ornament as an oriental carpet.

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Sadriddin Aini
Hodji Sadyk
Satym Ulug-zoda
Fazliddin Mukhammadiev
Sattor Tursun
Pulat Tolis
Rasul Hadi-zade
Maruf Bobodjan



Abdusalom Atabaev
Bahrom Firuz
Abdurofe Rabiev
Bolta Ortykov
Rakhim Jalil
Sorbon
Timur Zulfikarov



Raduga Publishers Moscow

Translated into English
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У подножья голубых гор
Рассказы таджикских писателей
На английском языке

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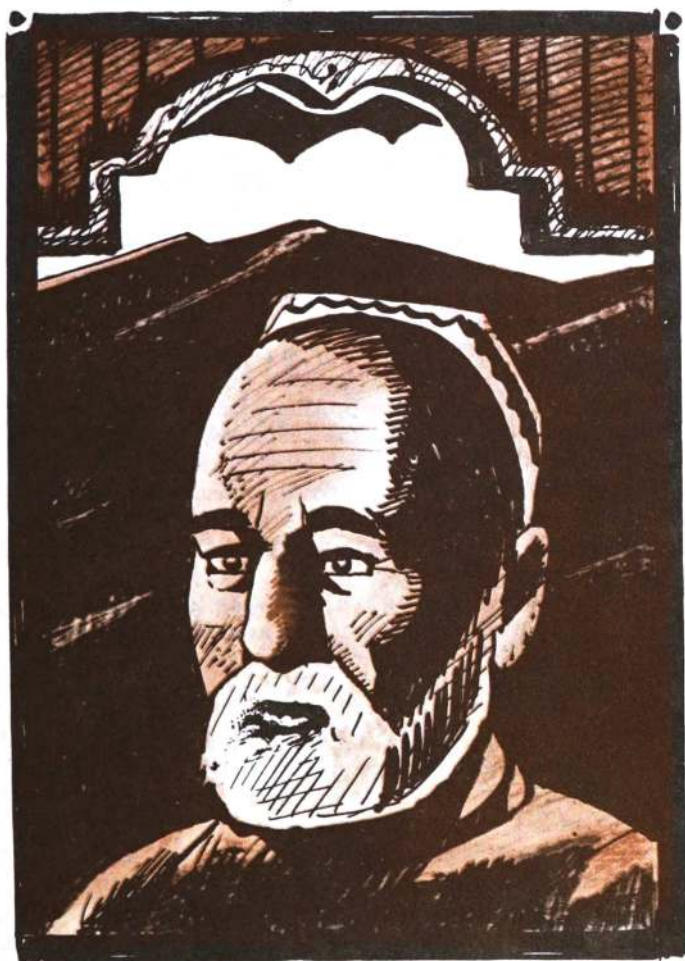
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Soviet Tajik writer, scholar, and public figure Sadriddin Aini was the first president of the Tajik Academy of Sciences, a winner of the USSR State Prize, and the founder of Soviet Tajik literature. During his long life (1878-1954) Aini experienced many hardships and deprivations. He was orphaned at an early age and was forced to provide for himself. Aini's father came from a long line of artisans: he was an educated man who appreciated the power of the pen. Life in the villages of Saktare and Makhallai Bolo, where the author spent his childhood, was a reflection of the specific social structure of the feudal Bukhara Emirate. The young Aini was determined to fight for the good and the enlightenment of his people, a decision which brought the wrath of the rulers of Bukhara down upon his head. The poet's elegy, "On My Brother's Death", composed in 1918, was an open call for the overthrow of the emir. For this, he was thrown into the darkest dungeon in all of Bukhara and sentenced to a terrible punishment which few survived—seventy-five lashes with a rod. But he survived and triumphed, devoting his whole life to the service of his long-suffering people.

In his trilogy, consisting of the novella *Odina* and the novels *Dokhunda* and *Slaves*, as well as in his *Reminiscences*, the writer has created a broad panorama of the existence and struggles of the Tajik people over the course of an entire century.

The present volume includes a slightly abridged version of a novella from the first part of Aini's book *Bukhara: Reminiscences*.

Sadriddin Aini

THE ROAD TO BUKHARA

NOVELLAS FROM THE BOOK *BUKHARA: REMINISCENCES*

*This house I've hewn of ancient stone,
And filled the hall with those I've known
To honor friends passed on
And tell of journeys of my own.*

THE VERY BEGINNING

I spent my childhood in two villages rather distant from each other and quite unlike in customs and appearance. Before I speak about myself, I will tell of these villages, for that about which I wish to write took place precisely there.

The village of Saktare stood on the bank of the Zeravshan about five miles from Gijduvan, the center of Gijduvan province. The Mazrangan Canal flowed through the village, providing an abundance of water for the fertile earth which allowed the local people to have fine orchards, vineyards, and truck gardens in which everything from various fruits and vegetables to thirsty rice-plants grew in profusion.

In Saktare, different peoples had lived together from days of old: there were Tajiks and Arabs—descendants of former nomads, migrants from Urgench, settlers from Persian Meshkhed, people from the ancient fortress of Gijduvan, and Uzbeks from Saidato in Shafrikan province. Most of the people in Saktare spoke Tajik, but the Arabs and the folks from Saidato preferred Uzbek. The peasants had but paltry holdings or no land at all; most of the land around Saktare was the property of two of the Persians, whom the villagers referred to as Allah's messengers or judges.

All the people of Saktare were either share-croppers or artisans. The Tajiks worked the emir's lands, while those from Urgench preferred to keep small groceries, and hadjis of every description engaged in fortune-telling and healing. Everyone for miles around brought their sick and insane to the hadjis to be treated. These wise men effected their cures by mysterious incantations. After the morning prayers, the elderly hadjis would remain in the mosque and chant the *Prayer for Victory* in sing-song voices. The afflicted

from villages all around gathered there in hopes that they would be made whole by the mere act of listening to the prayer.

The village mosque had a school where lessons were held in winter and summer alike, and likewise, there was a small madrassah at which more comprehensive lessons were offered. Because of these two modest schools, Saktare boasted more literate and educated people than anywhere else around.

The two large landowners of the area were responsible for the maintenance of the schools and the mosque, while all the official posts at the local level were held by prosperous Tajiks.

My father and grandfather were Saktare hadjis by birth.

The other village of my childhood, Makhallai Bolo in Shafrikan province, was about a mile to the northwest of Gijduvan Fortress on the edge of the shifting sands which stretched to the Kyzyl Kum Desert.

There was never enough water in Makhallai Bolo, and after the sand dunes spilled over into the ancient river bed of the Shafrikan, the village was left with no water at all.

There were no fine orchards here, just sour apples known as Hadjihoni. Only grapevines would grow well in the burning desert sands, and rarely did an occasional crop of anything other than grapes survive.

Because there was no water, vegetables grew poorly, and people planted wheat, rye, millet, and beans instead. Even cotton was scarce, with only one or two bolls forming on each stunted plant.

This was a poverty-stricken village with squalid adobe huts, and although everyone farmed, no one could make ends meet on agricultural profits alone. Many harvests were too small even to cover taxes, especially since the landowners took the lion's share of every one, despite the fact that their proper share was ten per cent of the total yield, a sum long agreed upon.

Most of the land thereabouts belonged to the emir, and the rest was held by the famous Miri-Arab Madrassah in Bukhara. So the peasants who worked that land gave either the emir or the madrassah their ten per cents. But the rich men of the area did not pay any taxes at all since they were close to the rulers of Bukhara: the poor bore the whole brunt of this financial burden which made their

situation even more desperate.

There were almost no skilled craftsmen in Makhallai Bolo except the cobblers, doubling as rag pickers, who worked for customers as poor and hungry as they themselves. In the Dekhnau Abdulladjan, the center of the village, worked cobblers who could resole or sew the legs of old boots, but the second-hand dealers reigned supreme here and deprived them of even this meager source of income.

Some managed to get by herding the rich men's flocks, while others worked as farm hands or gathered firewood. In winter time, almost everyone engaged in cleaning the merchants' cotton. But they received a mere pittance for their work, and more often than not, the hulls, which could be burned for firewood, were considered compensation enough.

My mother came from this village.

Saktare and Makhallai Bolo were a bit more than ten miles apart, while both villages were approximately twenty-five miles from Bukhara, Saktare to the northeast, and Makhallai Bolo to the north.

* * *

According to my father, Hadji Saidmurad, his father, Hadji Said Umar, was literate and knew both weaving and carpentry equally well, though he was more valued as a carpenter.

One day, the dilapidated old mosque in Makhallai Bolo finally fell to the ground, so the search was begun for a good carpenter to repair the structure, and my grandfather was offered the job.

My grandfather restored the mosque and carved on one of the posts:

"The work of Hadji Said Umar of Saktare."

The school at the mosque had ceased to function long ago, and so no one in Makhallai Bolo could read or write.

The people were so amazed to learn that the carpenter who had repaired their mosque was literate, they begged him to remain on as their imam, since then the village would have at least one learned man. The former imam, the spiritual leader of the village, had himself been illiterate and had known only several chapters of the Koran and a few prayers by heart. In addition to performing the various

religious functions, my grandfather would be able to work as a carpenter, of which the village was in dire need as well.

My grandfather was pleased by this offer, since in Saktare he did not make a great deal of money, despite his considerable skills: many of his relatives were fine carpenters, too. But here, except for a few men who made tools for cleaning cotton, there were no other woodworkers. And although there were millers, no one knew how to make mill-wheels, another trade at which my grandfather was proficient. So Said Umar decided that while his chief income would come from the mosque, carpentry would surely bring in some extra money. Thus, he moved to Makhallai Bolo.

He was given lodging in the men's half of the house of a peasant who lived near the mosque. His host's name was Hamrahhan.

Said Umar lived in this house for many years, and in the evenings after work, he tutored Dekhkan, the man's son. At that time, my grandfather's eldest son—my father—was studying at the madrassah in Bukhara, and the rest of his children were still in Saktare.

Finally, Said Umar tired of living alone. He bought a plot of land at the west end of the village and built a house there. He planted apricot trees, which do not require a great deal of water, around the house, and brought his family from Saktare.

Several years later, he saw that his house in Saktare was run down from neglect, and his land was overgrown with weeds from lying fallow. He had grown older and could not work as hard as he used to. So he called my father home from Bukhara, though he had not finished his studies, with the intention of finding him a wife.

As soon as my grandfather told his neighbors his plans for my father, they quickly found him a bride—Zavaroi, the third daughter of Hamrahhan.

Since Hamrahhan was not a wealthy man, my father's wedding was modest. When my father recounted this period in his life to me, he said:

"I loved my studies at the madrassah, and I had no desire to settle down and raise a family. But my mother and father were old, and they were having a hard time getting on without me, so I had to come home. In the summer I lived with my mother in Saktare. We farmed, and I gathered the

fruit and harvested the crop. In the winter, we went to Makhallai Bolo where my father and I made mill-wheels, wove cloth, and spun. But I still wanted to continue my studies. Finally, convinced that there was no chance of returning to my former life, I began to teach others—your uncle, Mullah Dekhkan, and the peasant boys. I taught them the basics of reading and writing, then sent them off to Bukhara to one or another of the madrassahs. I hoped that since nothing had come of me as a scholar, they would at least make something of themselves. But your Uncle Dekhkan was the only one who kept on with his studies: the rest stayed in Bukhara for two or three years, then left and found work as mullahs at the mosques round about.”

One day, my father’s pupils came to visit us—Mullah Babajan, Mullah Hamrah, Mullah Abdulvakhid, and Mullah Sabit.

Babajan was the mullah in the village of Rubakho, south of Makhallai Bolo.

My father told him:

“All my other pupils were the sons of prosperous men, and found their studies difficult. But your family was poor, and you spent all your childhood in want. I was sure you could cope with all the difficulties of life at the madrassah, but you failed! ...”

My father wanted to shame those who had the opportunity to study, but did not make the best of it.

After the death of my grandmother, and, two years later, of my grandfather, my father continued to keep the two households. In the summer, he farmed in Saktare and wove cloth, and in the winter, he made mill-stones in Makhallai Bolo. My father wove only enough cloth for the family, for clothing, blankets, and pillows, but the mill-stones he sold.

And thus I spent my childhood, wintering in Makhallai Bolo and going to Saktare, where I was born, for the summer.

THE HALVA MAKER’S

My mother was making halva, and I was helping her. First she browned some flour in a big copper pot, then she boiled a cup of molasses from Saktare; when it was the consistency of soup, she added it to the flour. The mixture thickened to the consistency of bread dough. Mother sprinkled some

flour on a plate, put the halva dough on it, and cut me a piece after it had cooled and hardened. The rest she cut into equal pieces, sprinkled flour on the top of each, and put them in a little box.

Munching on my piece with great delight, I went outside and met my brother coming in. He said:

"That's not real halva! It's more like bread crusts! Real halva is soft and oily! "

"Where did you ever eat soft halva?"

"At our grandfather's. Uncle Kuban Niyaz brought it. Would you eat it if someone gave it to you? It tastes good!"

"If anyone ever gives me some, I'll eat it for sure! But for the time being, I'll eat this."

"If I get you some, will you eat it?"

"Sure! "

"Then if you want some, go ask Father, 'Buy me some soft halva! ' "

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"I'm afraid he'll say no, that if he gives me any money now, there won't be any left for me to go to the madrassah in Bukhara."

"I want to go to Bukhara, too."

"You're still too little. Father will make more money before it's time for you to go. And by then, he'll have forgotten about the halva."

"O.K. I'll go ask him now! "

We both walked into my father's workshop. Still munching on my piece, I said:

"Please buy me some soft halva cooked in oil! "

Without taking his eyes off his shuttle, he answered:

"There's oil in the halva you're eating, and it's still fresh and fairly soft. So what kind of halva is it you want exactly?"

"I want some soft halva cooked in oil that tastes good—a kind I never had before."

"If you never ate it before, how do you know it tastes good?"

"My brother said so."

Muhiddin ran out of the workshop, for I had inadvertently given him away. Father laughed.

"Go tell your mother to send your brother out here."

I went to tell my mother what he had said and found

my brother hiding behind her skirts. He asked me in a threatening tone:

"Why did you give me away?"

I knew he was right, but my pride kept me from admitting it, so I asked him:

"And how would you have answered?"

Not knowing what to say in reply, he blushed. Of course, there was no other possible answer. Mother took him to my father, although he protested vehemently. We wondered how Father would punish him for putting me up to asking for the halva.

But Father laughed, took off his glasses, wiped them on his shirt, and asked:

"Muhiddin, do you know where Boloi Rud is?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you know where the mill by the river bank is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure?"

My brother nodded his head. Father looked at Mother and continued:

"They asked me for soft halva cooked in oil. I was afraid that if Muhiddin didn't know where Boloi Rud is, I might have to go after the halva myself. But since he knows, let him go and get it. And you can sit and spin me some thread—I'm almost out."

Father dug a coin out of his pocket and handed it to my brother. He gave further instructions:

"After you cross the stream, you'll come to a bridge. Go to the other side, and you'll see a big house. That's where Barot lives. He makes halva there. Go inside the house, and tell him I send my greetings. Ask him to give you a stick of halva. Wrap it up in a piece of paper and bring it home."

"How much is a stick?"

"A whole piece."

"Who's going to eat it, me or my brother?"

Father measured with his hands how big it would be, and added:

"It will be more than big enough for the both of you."

My brother got ready to go, and I asked permission to accompany him. So we set off for the village of Boloi Rud to get the halva.

Slipping and sliding merrily across the snowy ground, we soon reached the river.

Boloi Rud was located above the stream on the northern shore of the Shafrikan. To the south, the stream flowed into the river, and just above it stood the mill. When the river was up, it turned the mill-stone.

But when we reached the mill, the stream was dry, and there were only puddles of ice glistening in the river. I asked my brother to show me the mill, and he agreed, so we had a look around and continued on our way.

We did not cross the bridge, but jumped and slipped over the ice. We reached the far shore and went into the courtyard with its gates facing the bridge. In the center of the yard was a large adobe building about four times bigger than an ordinary house. It had nine beams in all.

We opened one of the doors and went in. There was a row of hearths with copper pots hanging over them. In some of the pots, molasses was boiling, and others contained soapwort, which can be beaten to a foam with a bundle of twigs. Over the far hearth hung an ordinary pot with boiling oil.

At one of the pots stood a man pouring flour that had already been browned into it, and two others were stirring the thickening mass with wooden paddles. They tossed it into the air with their paddles, turned it over quickly, and let it fall back into the pot again.

A tall man with a long black beard was in charge. There was a long platform in the other part of the room with a wooden trough some two meters in length. Goatskins were spread all around this enormous vessel, and nearby stood a huge bin of flour.

The halva-maker walked up to the bin, took some flour from it with a big copper scoop, and sprinkled it all over the bottom of the trough. Then he went over to the pot where flour was being mixed with the thick, boiled molasses, and made sure his helpers were doing their jobs properly. When the dough had thickened, he cried:

"That's enough! Bring it over here, now! "

And picking the dough up with their paddles, the assistants laid it out into the wooden trough.

Only then did the halva-maker look at us:

"What do you want?"

My brother proffered him the coin and passed on Father's greetings:

"Father sent us for one stick of halva."

"I sold all the halva I made this morning at the bazaar.

So wait a little, and there'll soon be a fresh stick for you. Meanwhile, sit over there so you can see how it's made."

The dough slowly spread out, filling the entire trough.

The men standing by the pots left them, washed their hands and arms up to the elbows, and sat down on the goat-skins around the trough. Their master also took his place on a skin, leaving only one small boy standing by the flour bin with a scoop in his hand.

The men rolled the dough into a long snake. They joined the ends and made a ring. Then, bending over the trough, they rolled and rolled the ring until it stretched all the way around the edge of the trough. Next, the boy took a scoop of flour and sprinkled it on the ring.

The men flipped one end of the ring over to make a figure-eight, then put one half of the eight on top of the other.

Now there were two rings, and again, the boy sprinkled flour on the dough.

This ring was also folded in half. It was smaller, but now there were four layers.

And thus, the men continued their work.

The third time the ring was folded, there were eight layers; the fourth time, there were sixteen; the fifth, thirty-two; the sixth, sixty-four; the seventh time, there were already a hundred and twenty-eight layers. The eighth, there were two hundred and fifty-six; the ninth, five hundred and twelve, and finally, the tenth time, there were one thousand twenty-four paper-thin layers.

The men kept rolling and folding the halva until it had been done twenty-five times.

Then, the halva-maker straightened up with relief and announced:

"That's enough! "

Then, taking his knife, he began to cut the ring into pieces, each about half an arm in length.

He put one piece on the scales standing in the corner, but it wasn't big enough, so he took a bit from another piece, and the scales balanced.

He wrapped up the big piece in some paper and gave it to my brother:

"Take this to your father."

He cut the smaller piece in half and gave one to each of us:

"And this is for you."

We hurried home, for night was falling.

THE SEA OF SAND

It was spring.

The apricots were blooming in our yard.

The peasants of Makhallai Bolo ploughed the earth, dug irrigation ditches, and pruned their grapevines.

The shepherd boys grazed cows, bulls, and sheep—their own or their masters'—on the fields which had not yet been plowed or along the river banks, ablaze with wild flowers.

One such day, I wanted to leave the confines of my garden and go out to the wide-open steppe.

I asked my brother if he wanted to go with me, and he did, but sent me to ask for permission.

First, I asked Mother.

"If it's all right with your father, you can go," she replied.

So I went to my father.

He was making a mill-wheel under a tent. With his spectacles on, he was hewing slots for the blades. His movements were well-calculated and his blows precise.

"Well, what do you want?" he inquired.

"We want to go to the steppe, so I came to ask your permission."

"Who wants to go?"

"Muhiddin and I."

"Your brother can't go anywhere until he's learned his lessons properly. He's been shilly-shallying about all week and hasn't done a bit of studying. So until he shows me he's learned everything he's supposed to, he can't play or go anywhere."

"Will you come with me?"

"You can go by yourself—don't be afraid. There are a lot of boys out in the fields. Your cousin Ergash is there with the flock."

So I went out to the steppe alone, to the broad, spacious steppe so unlike our tiny, cramped garden. Even the air there was sweeter.

The cool breeze carried various marvelous fragrances. Tender green wheat and barley shoots blanketed the earth, and the irrigation canal was bordered with fresh grass and bushes in bloom.

The boys bringing manure to the fields in donkey carts would empty their baskets and have races on the way back, or let the donkeys graze while they sat by the water.

I walked right up to the edge of the canal. Our house could be seen through the pruned mulberry bushes growing near the water. I was all alone with the swallows perched on the green twigs and the chirping sparrows flitting among the new leaves. The twitter of the birds, like the cooling, fragrant breeze, gladdened me.

Shepherd boys were wrestling on the low sand dunes on the other side of the canal. One of them was my elder cousin Ergash. I could see them from my side of the canal, which was so full of water I was afraid to cross over. But Ergash called out to me:

"Come on over here! Come on!" He ran up to the very edge and stood there calling me: "Come on across; the water is shallow here—only ankle-deep! There's nothing to be afraid of! "

So I rolled up my pants and waded across the canal. Ergash and I went to where the other boys were. They stopped wrestling and began to play tag. But the red sand, much like millet flour, was so fine their feet sunk immediately, and they would stumble and fall. The boys quickly tired of this game: many stretched out on the sand to rest and others went back to their flocks.

I liked watching the young lambs and kids. They played on the sand just like the boys: they butted one another, jumped, and chased each other. Some kids who had lost track of their mothers ran after the herd bleating pitifully.

Ergash asked:

"Why don't you take your parents something from here?"

"What could I take them from here? There doesn't seem to be much around."

"Have you ever eaten mushrooms?"

"I don't think so."

"They grow in the sand after it rains—lots of them. I already gathered a sackful. If you want, we can gather some for you."

"O.K. That sounds like a good idea! " I said gleefully.

Ergash took his stick and we set off.

We crossed two low sand dunes, and when we reached the third, we noticed slight rises in the sand. Ergash dug into one of the mounds with his stick and pulled out a mushroom. Soon I had filled the tails of my robe with them, and then he came up to me and said:

"Show me what you've gathered."

Glancing at my heap, he said:

"Pour them out on the ground! "

So I did, and he divided them into two piles. One had fleshy mushrooms with short, thick stems, and the other had long thin stems and large thin caps. There were only a few of the fleshy mushrooms, and pointing at them, Ergash explained:

"These are edible. They taste good. But those long ones are bitter and poisonous. You can't eat them."

We crossed two more dunes, and along the way, managed to gather a whole cap full of edible mushrooms.

Meanwhile, the wind was rising as we walked nearer the canal, it was already quite dusty.

The animals were getting jittery. The cows mooed. The shepherd boys could barely keep their flocks from scattering.

Ergash rounded up his animals and herded them to the canal.

"The sand is moving! " shouted one of the shepherds from the top of a dune.

Ergash ran across the dune, and I was close on his heels.

The wind was blowing from the northeast, and even turning my back to it, I had a hard time walking. I barely made it over the dune.

The sand began slowly to creep toward us in waves. The upper layers trickled into the canal, then even the lower layers began to shift.

The wind grew stronger, and the sky was black with dust.

The boys raced to get their flocks back to the village, and the animals ran home in terror, as if being chased by wild beasts.

Clutching the capful of mushrooms, I, too, hurried home. The field was not as unsteady as the sand, and the wind was blowing at my back, so the going was easy. But nothing was left of the calm beauty that had greeted me in the morning.

The leaves and grass had lost their brightness, and the fresh shoots of grain had withered.

I reached home to find my father still working on the slots for the blades of the mill-wheel. He was so involved in his work, he did not even stop to ask if I had had a good time, what I had seen, and where I had been.

I stood by Father for a while, then walked over to Mother and gave her the mushrooms.

"Please hurry and fry them. I'm dying to eat," I said.

Mother exclaimed:

"What a lot you've brought! There'll be enough for everyone! "

My brother was sitting in the corner doing his lessons. He raised his head and warned Mother:

"Make sure they're mushrooms and not toadstools! "

"I can tell the difference," I replied, not without a sense of accomplishment.

"They're all edible," affirmed my mother.

She took the mushrooms to the hearth, cleaned them, and fried them in oil.

Father worked on the wheel until evening fell, but that day it grew dark early. The wind rose, and a sandstorm began: the sand beat down upon the house like a torrential rain and was beginning to cover everything, so we closed the doors tightly and lit the lamp. Yet, sand poured in like water through the cracks in the door.

That night, for the first time, my family was fed on the fruits of my labor. I ate the mushrooms and quickly fell asleep, overcome with exhaustion from the day's adventures.

In the morning, I was awakened by the voices of my mother and father. I listened to their alarmed conversation.

They were saying that sand had buried many villages, and a lot of crops had been destroyed. My grandfather's grapevines were also covered with sand.

"Put the tea on. We have to get over there as soon as we can to help your father. Otherwise, everything will be lost," Father was saying. "We'll have to do something to keep the sand out in the future."

I ran outside.

It was a quiet, sunny morning with barely a breeze. But our whole courtyard and the ground in the garden had been transformed overnight into a desert. My legs sunk in the sand.

The blossoms on the apricots looked like dead bees. All the sprouts and plants had been drowned in the sand. The garden which just the day before had been a joy to behold had suddenly been plunged into mourning.

Father told Mother to get the axe, the hand saw, and the hoe. He donned his working robe and got ready to leave. I asked if I could go with him.

"Come on then!" he assented. "Yesterday, when you went to the steppe, the earth was still alive. But today you will see that it is quite dead. You will surely find it useful to have had a look at both the one and the other."

So we set off for Grandfather's.

My grandfather's sons—my uncles Kurban Niyaz, Raus-han Niyaz, and Niyazkhan—were already there. But Alikhan, the fifth son, had loaded a sack of tea on his donkey and was heading for the bazaar to sell it, as usual.

"Why don't you stay and help us?" Father asked him. "How can you think about business on a day like this?"

"I've no use for the garden or the earth! All I care about is the bazaar!" answered Alikhan.

Father muttered softly:

"You've a black heart, brother-in-law. Rotten to the core."

My grandfather shouted to him from the house:

"Why are you wasting your breath on that swine?! We have more important things to do."

It was obvious that Grandfather and Alikhan had already had words over the vineyard.

My uncles picked up their hoes, shovels, and axes, and set off. Grandfather took a sack of bread, a tea pot, and some cups, climbed on the donkey, and sat me behind him. Everyone hurried out to the steppe.

As she saw us off, Grandmother prayed loudly, beseeching Allah to help us in our hour of need and keep our labors from being in vain.

STRUGGLE AGAINST THE SAND

My grandfather's orchard and fields were on the edge of the Koko Steppe, which stretched east of Makhallai Bolo until it reached the fields of the village of Karakhani.

The Koko Steppe lay to the south of the ancient bed of the Shafrikan and was considered well-supplied with water.

But when we reached the steppe, there was nothing but sand. Great dunes had appeared to the northeast. They grew smaller to the southwest, until finally, there was a thick layer of sand that reached a grown man's knee.

The steppe was alive with people swarming about like ants. They were tying up the grapevines. Twice they had dug out these vines, and twice the sands had covered them again. People were carting the sand from their plots by the sackful and wheelbarrowful.

Finally, we reached my grandfather's vines. He had two plots of land. One, about an acre and a half large, had no wall to protect it from the shifting sands. The other, nearer the canal and about half that size, had an adobe wall almost two meters high around it.

The big plot was entirely covered with sand, while only about a third of the other had been damaged: the sand had engulfed the river, reached the height of the wall, and begun to pour over the top.

Even though the wind had died down, the sand continued to shift, more slowly to be sure. It flowed like water flooding a canal, spreading farther and farther, swallowing the green shoots of the grapevines in its wake...

At the edge of the reservoir, my grandfather spread a blanket and put the sacks down. Only two days before, sitting there under the shade of the ancient Chinese elm, he had rejoiced in the beauty of the water sparkling through the branches of the fruit trees. But now, neither the reservoir nor the canal remained: they had been buried under a huge mound of sand reaching as high as the branches of the tree.

Father told my uncles to cut willow and poplar branches, then mulberry and elm, and drag them up to the walls of the smaller plot. That done, they took more branches to the larger, unprotected orchard.

My father cut the twigs from the branches with his gardener's knife. Then he wedged the poles between the adobe wall and the sand on the outside. He wove the twigs and smaller branches between the poles as if he were making an enormous basket.

When that was done, he said:

"If you can manage to haul all the sand out of the garden today, it will be saved because this wattle fence will stop the sand from pouring in."

Next, he walked over to the other plot and began to drive in rows of poles, and my uncles made a wattle fence by weaving smaller branches between the poles.

All this took a long time, but only after it was done did everyone gather around my grandfather to eat.

My father got ready to leave:

"Well, I think I'll go now. Your sons can finish the wattle fence themselves. They don't need my help for that. And hauling the sand out is a long, arduous task. So you just sit here and rest. Your sons are strong and will manage without you."

So my wisened old grandfather thanked Father for his help and told him good-bye. Uncle Kurban Niyaz said to Father:

"I hope to be as tireless and persistent as you one day."

"That's not hard to do," Father replied. "If you really want to, you can do anything. It's very unlikely that loafers and idlers realize how strong hard work can make a man or what great joy it can bring him. So if you want to be strong, work hard. Don't loaf about! "

We went home another way, over the sand-filled canal.

When we reached the village of Boloi Rud, we found ruins instead of rows of cozy houses. Roofs stuck up above the sand in a few places, and there were women sadly clutching household possessions, and children all clustered on the tops of the dunes. In the course of the night, all these people had been rendered homeless. They had managed to save only a few things: their pillows, pots, plates, and floor runners lay in heaps on tattered blankets.

"The men must have gone to the near-by villages in search of shelter," commented my father, thoughtfully gazing at the aftermath of the sandstorm.

We reached Barot the halva-maker's house. Only the roof of the building where the halva was made was visible. This once proud structure was now walled in by sand on three sides. Only the south face was free. The gate and fence were under the sand as well, so my father walked right up to the house over the mounds of sand. He shouted:

"Barot! Where are you, Barot?! "

"Down here buried alive in this grave of sand with my children! "

He emerged from the door through which my brother and I had gone for halva not long before. The haggard man told us:

"When the storm began, I brought my wife and the girls and all our belongings from the house into my shop. My sons and I crawled onto the roof and threw the sand off with shovels. So we managed to save this building at least." His eyes filled with tears.

"There's no reason to complain. Most of the others are homeless and utterly destitute," my father tried to comfort him.

When he had calmed down a bit, we went on our way.

The canal, the bridge, and the stream near Barot's house were gone, and the mill my brother and I had examined not long before was nowhere to be seen.

My father walked over to where the mill had been. It had collapsed under the weight of the sand, and all that remained was a mound to mark where it had stood for so long.

When we reached the house, we found that my father's brother Hadji Usto had arrived. A few days before, he had gone to the neighboring village of Tezguzar to build a house and had just come back.

Hadji Usto told us:

"The fields of Bagiafzal and Tezguzar, and the village of Karagach and the settlements all around it, Abdullajan, Mukhammed Boki, and part of Kachekhuran are completely buried in sand. They say the sands covered everything as far as the village of Saidato all the way to the Vardanze hills."

My father said:

"And the canal is no more. So even the places which survived intact will not recover easily, for there is no water. It seems that all of Shafrikan Province has become a thirsty, lifeless desert overnight."

My mother asked him how things were at my grandfather's, then added:

"Because you went to help my father today, you haven't done a thing for yourself. Remember, you told me you needed to finish that mill-wheel as quickly as possible."

Father smiled at her words and shook his head:

"The miller who ordered that wheel gave me a deposit. I promised to finish the work in a week. But he has no use for

the mill-wheel now, because the stream is no more, and the mill has collapsed under the weight of the sand. I don't know where we'll get the money from but now I'll have to give him his deposit back."

While mother made tea, he listened to my brother recite his lessons.

SAKTARE

Before I begin to tell of my life in Saktare, I must describe our dwelling there.

Our home in Saktare stood next to a mosque on a quiet lane at the northern end of the village.

There were several other houses on our lane, and the school and the orchard of the mosque as well. The gate to our courtyard opened onto an alleyway.

A host of relatives and in-laws shared the courtyard with us. It was about two hundred meters long and a hundred and fifty wide, and divided into four sections. Our section was right next to the gate while the others belonged to my father's uncle—my grandfather's brother—and my father's cousins.

A low wall separated the courtyards from the mosque and its orchard, and to the east and west, adobe walls separated them from our neighbors. The high brick wall on the northern side fenced the courtyards off from the steppe, and so each yard had an exit right onto the steppe.

Our closest neighbor to the north was my father's uncle, Hadji Abdulla, who, according to my parents, was over ninety at the time. In the inner courtyard of his house stood a ramshackled building where his daughter-in-law lived with her sister, and in the outer courtyard rose a home with delicately carved wooden posts on the porch, similar to those of a mosque. Here, he himself lived in the guest room.

In years gone by Hadji Abdulla had been a joiner and had had a plot of land. But his son was a ne'er-do-well who had had no interest in either woodworking or gardening. When my father's uncle was too old to work any more, he and his son had sold their plot of land and lived on the money while it lasted. At the time I am writing about, this uncle already had no source of income whatsoever and lived on the charity of his relatives. He sat whole days in the guest room with-

out saying a word, rarely entering the courtyard, and then only reluctantly.

Hadji Ibragim, Hadji Abdulla's son, wandered from village to village. He was literate, and it was said that he made his living doing incantations and exorcisms. But it was obvious that even in such simple matters, he had met with little success. He came home once every two or three weeks, but what he brought with him was not even sufficient to feed his daughter, his wife, and her sister, who lived with them. He gave nothing to his ninety-year-old father, who called him a worthless good-for-nothing.

Once, my father tried to shame Hadji Ibragim for his neglect of the old man, but he only laughed off Father's reproaches. Then he mounted his horse and took off once more for parts unknown.

Across the courtyard from Hadji Abdulla lived an old woman everyone called Tuta-posho—Auntie Tsarina. I have no idea what her real name was. Everyone who heard her nickname imagined her sitting atop a pile of blankets arrayed in silk or velvet robes, haughtily ordering her servants about. But that was not the case at all: she wore a threadbare dress all in patches, and there was nothing in her house save a shabby goatskin, a threadbare rug, a torn blanket, and a few pillows and cushions.

She was supposed to be more than eighty, and indeed, she was so bent with age that she could hardly walk: so she lay abed most of the time. There was an enormous cushion under her head and one just as large under her feet to give her hunched frame as much support as possible. She was the widow of another of my father's uncles, Hadji Abdul Kudus, who had died long ago. Their son, Hadji Sharaf, wasted away all the property left him and then set off for Karshi to stay with some distant relatives, but even there, Hadji Sharaf continued to do nothing.

He came to see his mother once a year, bringing just enough food to last his brief visit of one or two weeks. Then again, poor Tuta-posho had to depend on handouts from the neighbors and relatives.

My father's cousin, Hadji Hidayat, a pleasant, well-educated man lived on the fourth plot of land in our courtyard. He was about fifty at the time and an excellent joiner. It was said his equal could not be found anywhere—even in Bukhara. For his skill, people referred to him not by name,

but as Hadji Usto—the master craftsman.

He had two sons from his first wife. The elder, Said Akbar, was the same age as my brother, and they both took lessons from the village schoolteacher. The other son's name was Hadji Ikram. He could barely read and write, so he helped his father with the carpentry. After his first wife died, Hadji Usto remarried and had two daughters by his second wife. At the time I am describing, the girls were still very little, and their mother was very proud that she was descended from a long line of hadjis. She was so proud, in fact, that except for cooking, she wouldn't do a thing. The apricots fell from the trees and rotted in her yard, but she would not gather and dry them.

Despite his great skill as a joiner, Hadji Usto lived no better than we did, but he helped both Tuta-posho and the ninety-year-old Hadji Abdulla out of the goodness of his heart.

The year the Shafrikan ran dry, my father sent us from Makhallai Bolo to Saktare quite early, although we usually did not arrive until the mulberries were ripe. This year, though, the berries had barely come out when we got there.

My brother and Said Akbar went to the village schoolteacher for their lessons while I spent all my time with the younger boys, playing in the canals and streams of which there were a great number in this village.

Father decided we should spend that winter in Saktare as well, for in Makhallai Bolo, the only source of drinking water was a distant well. For this reason, he tore down our old house in Saktare and built a new one, even adding various sheds and outbuildings to it, in which task he was assisted by Hadji Usto. My brother and Hadji Ikram helped a bit as well. Only Said Akbar refused to work, claiming that he wanted to become a scribe and that his hands would become rough from the bricks and clay, and his penmanship would be spoiled.

TUTA-POSHO

My friends and I loved our visits to Tuta-posho more than anything. We would listen with baited breath to her marvelous stories and fairy tales. She knew all the legends of Rustam, Isfandiar, Siyavush, and Abu-Muslim by heart. The

first three were the legendary warriors from Firdousi's poem *Shakh-nameh*—men known for their strength and loyalty to their homeland. The latter was a historical figure of the eighth century whose political activities and military prowess have given rise to numerous legends and tales.

We would bring the old woman pita bread, dried apricots, or something else tasty, and she, lying on her cushions, would tell us countless stories for this. Enthralled, we would forget the world around us, her crippled body covered with a pauper's blanket, and the dark walls of her squalid hovel. She took us with a sure hand and guided us to her magic kingdom.

One day she told us the tale "The Industrious Servant and His Cunning Master". I remember every word of it to this day!

Tuta-posho told her story:

"Once upon a time, there lived a stingy, deceitful master. He made his farm hands and servants work for him for nothing.

"Whenever they came to him to receive their due, he deceived them with all manner of debts, real and imagined, such that no one was ever able to quit his service.

"Even if the servant managed to pay off this imaginary debt, the master would find a way to scare, trick, or deceive the poor soul again. Thus, the servants were forced to work for this wicked man till the day they died.

"When all his old servants had died, the wicked master was left with no one to do his work for him. No one would agree to enter his service no matter how he tried to entice them, and no matter how hard he promised to pay them on time. His ill fame as a deceiver and slanderer was so wide spread that no matter where he looked for servants, everyone knew who he was and declined to work for him.

"One day, he gathered the poorest men in the village in front of the mosque and swore before the mullah that he would pay honestly and promptly anyone who agreed to work for him, but still, no one would go, for they knew better than to believe him.

"Finally, the master called an orphan boy who lived in the village to his house and said:

" 'My boy, you have no father, and I have no son. Come

to live with me and I will adopt you as my own. I will give you my only daughter in marriage when she comes of age, and after my death, all that I have will be yours.'

"He called his five-year-old daughter to him and said:

" 'When she grows up, this beautiful girl will be your bride.'

"So the youth agreed and began to work for his new master that very day.

"Days, months, and years passed. The boy kept his end of the bargain and worked as hard as he could. And he paid a great deal of attention to his master's daughter, making her toys, telling her amusing stories, and entertaining her as best he could.

"The girl became quite attached to the amiable, considerate youth.

"As she grew older, she became even more attached to him and fell in love with him. And every time he set out for the field, he would look back over his shoulder at his master's house as if he had left some treasure there. So the lad worked more and more, as if his labor could bring the long-awaited wedding day closer more quickly.

"And indeed, the master treated him well, never ordering him about, but rather asking him politely to do whatever was needed. Finally, the girl grew impatient and tried to convince the lad to send someone to her father to ask him to fix the day of the wedding. But he replied that it would be better if her father were to bring the matter up of his own accord, without any prompting from them.

"When the daughter was seventeen, match-makers began to appear from all sides. The girl grew uneasy, for her mother listened to them seriously and asked questions about the size of the bride-price, but never told anyone that her daughter was already betrothed to their servant. At last, the poor girl understood that her father would never give her to her beloved in marriage: her parents were simply waiting for a rich son-in-law so they could sell their child for the highest price possible.

" 'You can be sure that if my father marries me to anyone but you, I shall kill myself! ' she said to the lad.

" 'If your father gives you to someone else, I will kill myself, too! ' he replied and set off to talk with the mullah before whom the master and his servant had concluded their agreement. The youth asked the holy man to inter-

vene. The mullah agreed, and set off for the master's house. When confronted, the master only laughed:

" 'There's no need to trouble your head about any of this. If my servant asks you about his affairs again, send him to me, and I will answer him myself.'

"Then the master went to his servant and said:

" 'My son, don't get strangers mixed up in our household affairs. And you needn't worry about all these match-makers. After all, your fiancée is a beauty, and many would take her to wed. We do not want to offend anyone, so we dare not turn their offers down rudely. We simply ask such a high bride-price it scares away all prospective suitors.'

"So the youth was reassured, and he reassured the girl as well. He began to work even harder from that day forth.

"One day, an entire caravan of camels with splendid saddles arrived at the master's house. Some of the camels were laden with sacks of rice and flour, while others bore sweetmeats and sugar, candies and halva. Others carried satin clothes, silks, velvets, and brocades. The camels knelt by the gates in turn to be unloaded, and their burdens were carried into the house. Everyone knew that the master had betrothed his daughter to some richman, that the caravan had brought the bride-price, and soon, there would be a wedding feast.

"The servant realized what had happened as well, and it was like a bolt from the blue.

"At first he thought of killing himself, but then decided: 'There'll be plenty of time for that later, but while I am yet alive, I must fight for my happiness. When there is no hope left, then I shall take my own life.'

"While everyone in the house was busy looking at the presents and rich clothing the bridegroom had sent, the youth went to the inner courtyard and, catching sight of the girl, called her aside. She burst into tears and showed him the dagger she had hidden in the folds of her dress:

" 'I am just waiting for the chance to pierce my breast with it! '

" 'I was going to do the same at first, but then I thought up a way to save us both.'

"When she heard his words, she hugged him and kissed him for the first time.

" 'Tell me quickly, for I fear I shall die of happiness without learning what I must do! '

“ ‘Wait a bit. Pretend you are looking forward to the wedding. I will choose the proper time to come to you, and we shall run away together. I will not wait around for the engagement feast, but will go now to make everything ready for our escape. After the feast, I shall return and demand from your father all that I have earned in twelve years of service. We will surely need the money after we have run away.’ ”

“After that conversation, the young man disappeared from the village and returned a week after the engagement feast.

“The master was sitting in front of the mosque with the mullah and some other men. The servant went up to him and said:

“ ‘I ate a great deal while I was in your service and worked very little, so now I ask your leave to go. If you will but give me what I have earned, it will be a great kindness on your part.’ ”

“ ‘What is it exactly that you have earned?’ asked the master angrily.

“ ‘My wages for twelve years of labor. The mullah was present when we made our agreement.’ ”

“The master’s face flushed with rage, but he did not lose control of himself.

“ ‘Well then, since you demand what is yours, you will get what is coming to you. This morning I dragged half a sack of wheat from the barn to take to the miller, but I haven’t had it ground yet. Let that be your wages.’ ”

“ ‘Is that all you plan to give me for twelve years of labor? I see you do not fear Judgement Day!’ ”

“The master did not know what to say, but the mullah came to his rescue.

“ ‘Tell me,’ he asked the young man, ‘when you were hired, did your master promise you any money or property?’ ”

“ ‘He promised to make me his son-in-law.’ ”

“ ‘Such a promise cannot be considered a promise of goods or pecuniary reward. Did he specifically promise you any pay or property for your service?’ ”

“ ‘No.’ ”

“ ‘Fine!’ said the mullah. ‘Since he promised you no money or goods, anything he sees fit to give you will be considered payment for your services. Take it and be grateful.’ ”

“The mullah’s judgement angered the youth, but a clever

idea suddenly popped into his head. So glancing at his master, he said calmly:

“ ‘Then I shall take the wheat. But what if your wife will not allow me to take it from the courtyard?’ ”

“ ‘If she will not allow you to take it, have her step outside and look in my direction. I will confirm my words with a nod and a wave.’ ”

“So the young man ran to the master’s courtyard and saddled the horse. He told his mistress:

“ ‘My master has told me to take the wheat to the miller’s and bring your daughter with me so she can have a look at the mill before her wedding. Go tell her to get ready, please.’ ”

“ ‘You are lying,’ replied his mistress. ‘He would never allow his daughter to go anywhere with a servant after her engagement!’ ”

“ ‘If you don’t believe me, go out onto the street and ask him yourself.’ ”

“So the mistress walked out with him and the boy shouted:

“ ‘She doesn’t believe me!’ ”

“So the master waved his hand and nodded his head at his wife, thus giving his permission.

“Then the servant ran into the house, loaded the sack of wheat on the horse, mounted himself, helped the girl up behind, spurred the horse, and galloped away.

“By the time the master set off after them, they had disappeared from sight.

“And so the young man and his beautiful bride settled down in a distant place, and all their dreams came true.”

Tuta-posho was a master in the art of narrating in vivid but simple language which enthralled and excited her listeners.

Alas, I have almost entirely forgotten her manner of speaking, for since the days I listened to her so avidly, more than sixty years have passed, and now I retell these tales in my own way. But I have never forgotten her in all this time, and I have always tried, after her example, to write as simply as I could.

I consider this eighty-year-old woman my first teacher, and whenever I think of her, my heart fills with gratitude.

A NEW CANAL FOR SHAFRIKAN

Spring came, the green apricots were ripening, the mulberries appeared, and people began to cut mulberry branches to feed their silk worms.

The Mazrangan flowed rapidly, swollen from the spring rains.

The peasants plowed the fields, harrowed the earth, and sowed their crops.

The swallows busily made nests of tiny lumps of wet clay that looked like cotton seeds. These boat-shaped nests appeared on the cornices of all the houses.

The storks built their nests atop mausoleums and caught grass snakes in the puddles. The gaudy pheasants, quaking in fear before the vociferous storks, flitted from bush to bush.

Everything that lived was in motion—animals, plants, and people. It was spring!

One of these lovely days when the spring clouds were shading the farmers from the blazing sun, my father came from Makhallai Bolo.

Tying the donkey to the mulberry bush, he pulled the saddle-bag off and entered the courtyard. My mother came out to meet him, took the bag from him, and inquired after his health.

But father only passed on greetings from her parents and silently entered the house. Mother hung the saddle-bag from an awning and quickly followed him in. She took his robe and turban, hung them on a nail by the door, spread out a blanket and laid round cushions upon it. Father seemed distracted and displeased about something. He said:

“Put the samovar on for tea right away, and get the meat from the saddle-bag before the cat carries it off.”

Then he lay back on the cushion. I crept up quietly and sat down beside him. His face looked sad. When the tea was ready, my mother spread a clean cloth and laid out bread and sweets.

Even after a cup of tea, Father's expression was no less distraught.

Mother inquired cautiously:

“What has happened? Could it be that you haven't managed to sell the mill-wheel yet?”

“I sold it and bought two elms with the money. I've

already felled them and chopped the wood into pieces," he replied and fell silent again.

"Could it be that you are not feeling well? For Goodness' sake, please tell me what is wrong. Why are you so upset?"

"I'm not sick. I'm just angry about what is going on in Shafrikan!" he answered and said no more. But now she knew what line of questioning to pursue: he had given her the clue she needed.

"They say a new canal is being dug for Shafrikan. Is that true?"

"Yes," Father answered, "but it would be better if they didn't dig it at all! That accursed canal is bringing the people more grief than the sands that filled the old bed. That work will help them about as much as prayers help the dead!"

After resting a while and calming down, Father told us about everything in more detail.

The previous autumn, the residents of Shafrikan had decided to dig the old river-bed from under the sand and fill it with water again. But to no avail. Several times, they had dug out the river-bed and filled it with water, but within a couple of days, the sand from the banks would seep in, and it would run dry at once.

After that, the most eminent rich people in Shafrikan Province appealed to the emir to have a new canal that would be paid for by a special tax to be levied on all the residents of the whole region.

So the emir issued a command for four Shafrikan officials—the judge, the chief administrator, the head of the guardsmen, and the tax collector—to undertake the digging of the new canal.

These four officials, picked an appropriate place of work, then assembled the population, and explained the working conditions. That had been six months ago, and since then, less than three miles had been dug. And what remained of the meager property that had been left after the disastrous sandstorm had all been taken from the peasants for the maintenance of these four corrupt officials.

Father described the work-in-progress:

"I went out to see how the work was going. I found tents for the officials and their men in the field. There were about two hundred administrators in all. A butcher was cutting up a sheep nearby. There were cooks making rice pilaff, frying

meat, and baking pita bread. The horses of these two hundred men were tethered near their tents eating clover. Bags of oats were brought to feed them in the evening. The village elders sent them donkeys laden with rice, barley, and flour. Near each tent was a boiling samovar. The two hundred men were eating rice pilaff and drinking tea. It was two hours till sunset. At this late hour, the authorized agents came out of the tents, gathered their assistants, and ordered them to assemble the navy to begin work.

About an hour passed before they began work, and each village dug only several yards of earth. Then the officials would order their agents to shout to the workers: "That's all for today! Come earlier tomorrow, or you'll lose your last money! "

And that is how the work was proceeding.

"What's the point of wasting all that time? What will those officials get out of it?"

"When the work is completed, where will those two hundred idlers find rice, meat and bread, not to mention oats and hay for their horses? But it's not just food they're getting. Every day, they collect ten thousand copper coins from the people for digging the canal. Half of the money, they line their pockets with, and the rest, they squander on food and drink."

Father finished his tea and fell silent.

He looked at my mother with eyes full of mischief:

"I decided to do something about it. What will come of it, I don't know. We'll just have to wait and see."

But what he was planning to do, he didn't say. So my mother asked cautiously but firmly:

"What have you got up your sleeve?"

"It's better to keep mum about it for the time being, and don't you tell anyone about it either. But when I saw that the people were being utterly impoverished and not a drop of water was forthcoming, I wrote an appeal to the emir. I covered an entire sheet of paper with all our grievances! I described how the work was going, and asked that it at least be directed by an honest man. I explained that this delay was just as harmful to the government as to the people: if there is no canal, there will be no water, and nothing will grow. If there is no harvest, the emir will not receive his taxes, because there will be nothing to take and no one to give it! "

"In whose name did you write this appeal of yours?" asked Mother.

"In my own. But don't worry. I didn't say who I was. At the end of the appeal I wrote: 'The writer of this letter has no land in the region in question and has no need of water. I wrote this letter to Your Highness only out of concern for the good of the people and the state.' "

"And have you already sent it to the emir?" she inquired joyfully.

"It should already be there—I sent it with your brother Kurban Niyaz. He is intelligent and persistent. He has gone to Bukhara, and when the emir leaves the Arg to go to the mosque on Friday, Kurban Niyaz is supposed to pass the petition on to one of the emir's servants from the crowd. The servant will give the letter to the emir, and after he reads it, he will make his decision. What he will decide to do, I have no idea. But I think he'll understand that it's in his best interest to do something about the sad state of affairs in Shafrikan."

And when Father said that, he seemed sure that his labors had already borne fruit, for his face was not cloudy like before, and he had a smile on his lips as he repeated:

"In his best interest..."

Father got up and went about his business. The next day, he was working at his loom.

Two weeks after my father returned from Makhallai Bolo, Said Akbar and my brother came home for the summer.

After a break of a fortnight, they resumed their studies with our village teacher.

A month later, my uncle Mullah Dekhkan arrived to visit his sister, my mother. He studied in Bukhara with the son of Abdolvakhid, the judge of Gijduvan, and after their lessons in the city ended, they both went to Gijduvan to take lessons from the judge himself. At that time, the judge received orders from the emir to go to Shafrikan province and personally inspect the work on the canal. He was to see that the canal was ready in time for spring sowing so the peasants would have water for their fields. My father's face lit up when he heard that. He was so happy it seemed he would take wing and burst into song like a bird. He seemed to grow taller and taller until his head almost touched the sky. He straightened his shoulders and puffed up his chest. His joy was boundless.

Brimming with joy, he gave my mother a conspiratorial glance. After a short pause, he asked Mullah Dekhkan:

"And after the judge arrived, how did the work go?"

"When I was in Gijduvan," my uncle replied, "the order arrived, so the judge cut short our lessons and set off for Shafrikan. I stayed on for two more days, then came here. And from you, I will go to my parents. So I can't really say how the work is going, but I heard that the emir had sent the four Shafrikan officials packing and confiscated all their property.

* * *

Ten days after that conversation, Mullah Dekhkan set off for his parents' in Makhallai Bolo, and my father went with him to see how the work was going under the judge of Gijduvan. I entreated him to take me along.

So the three of us made the trip to Makhallai Bolo and stopped off at my grandfather's.

Gradually, as the news of our arrival spread, the old men of the village gathered at my grandfather's to see my father and uncle. They were all quite pleased with how the work on the canal was going under the new administrator:

"He ordered that the digging start early in the morning and continue until dark with only an hour's break at noon for lunch."

And everyone had to bring his own lunch from home. The foremen were also required to bring their own provisions instead of simply taking them from the peasants. The judge himself had brought two men with him, a messenger and a servant, whom he sent back to his house for food and supplies whenever necessary.

In the ten days Judge Abdulvakhid had been in charge of the work, as much had been accomplished as in the previous ten months. When my father heard that, he was overjoyed, and said to my uncle:

"Let's go out there and have a look. We can at least wish them luck."

My uncle agreed, and the three of us set off at once.

The canal had been dug all the way to the village of Rubakho about a thousand paces to the south of Makhallai Bolo.

The judge, girdled and holding a long willow staff, stood

by the edge of the new canal. He was a short, lean man with a swarthy face and neatly trimmed gray beard. His long, thick eyebrows resembled those of my ninety-year-old grandfather.

My uncle greeted Judge Abdolvakhid in the manner of the students of the madrassah, bowing low, and then introduced my father.

"This is my brother-in-law. He has come to pay his respects."

The judge inquired:

"Is this the man who taught you to read and write, then sent you to Bukhara to study?"

"One and the same," my uncle replied.

The judge addressed my father:

"I have heard a great deal about you from my son who studies with your wife's brother." Then he looked at me and asked: "Whose boy is this?"

"He is my son," answered Father.

The judge picked me up so my head was level with his, then put me down again.

"May you grow up strong and healthy to become a wise and learned man." He produced a piece of candy wrapped in red paper from his pocket and handed it to me. "Has he started school yet?"

"He will begin in the fall."

By that time, my uncles, Kurban Niyaz, Raushan Niyaz, and Niyazkhan, who were working along with everyone else, came over.

"And who are these men?" asked the judge.

"They are my brothers," replied my uncle.

"Good, they are fine workers," responded the judge and, looking their way, added: "Go back to work now; there will be time enough for visiting in the evening." But he held Kurban Niyaz back and told Mullah Dekhkan: "Your brother Kurban Niyaz is an excellent worker. I have only ten like him here, but in intellect and temperament, he outdoes them all."

It was obviously difficult for the judge to talk standing up, so, leaning on his long staff, he sat down, and invited us to do the same.

"The very day I arrived," he told us, "I asked the foremen to find ten carpenters to build the bridges and dikes while the canal was being dug. One of them told me that

carpenters would not work for less than five silver coins a day. So ten carpenters would cost us fifty pieces of copper a day, but I had forbidden the collection of additional taxes from the people. So where would we get the money? Then that young man," he continued, pointing at Kurban Niyaz, "heard of our dilemma and came to me. 'Speak your mind,' I told him. 'There are at least fifty carpenters and joiners digging the canal along with everyone else. If you would but free them from the digging, they'd gladly ply their trade without additional pay.'

"So I immediately called all the carpenters to me from among the diggers and picked ten of the most skilled. I set them to building the bridges and dikes so that part of the work would not fall behind the digging. I was quite pleased by his quick wit and courage, for not everyone would have risked going over the heads of the foremen to offer me such timely advice. A man needs both a quick mind and pluck, for intelligence without bravery will get you nowhere, and courage without a good mind to direct it is a dangerous thing." Finishing this, he addressed Uncle Dekhkan: "If you would agree to leave your brother in my service, I would be grateful. Is he literate?"

"No," admitted my uncle.

"No matter. He is intelligent and brave, and those two qualities will allow him to master anything he sets his mind to."

The judge sent Kurban Niyaz back to work and asked his servant to give him some tea. The latter took a cup and a copper kettle from a leather bag hanging on a nearby tree. He poured a cup for the judge who drank it down in two gulps and ordered the servant to give us some as well.

"We made that tea back in Gijduvan, and it grew cold along the way. Do not be offended, for still it is better than unboiled water."

After my father and uncle had drunk their tea, the judge stood up, and we after him. He suggested:

"Let us go and wish the workers every success."

So he led the way with my father and uncle a little behind. I followed them.

The judge stopped at each artel, wished the men success, and inquired after something or other.

The foremen and elders, girdled and sitting in the shade of the trees, jumped up as soon as they saw the judge coming.

They ran over to their men and began shouting orders, trying to give the appearance that they were quite busy and weighed down with concern for the work in progress.

One very stout foreman who had been nonchallantly sitting under a tree some moments before, threw himself into his work with a passion, giving instructions loudly so the judge would be sure to hear how well he was explaining how the work should be done to his men.

When the judge walked up to him, the fat man greeted him respectfully, but the judge replied:

"Does it not seem that you have gotten a bit too stout, foreman? Obviously, your great weight is a burden to you, and I fear that your supervisory tasks will not help you to be rid of it. However, if you would be so kind as to take a hoe in your hands and commence digging, it would be most beneficial to you and would help the workers as well."

"Yes, sir," he hurried to reply, but without any joy. The fat man slid down the side of the canal, took a hoe from one of the men, and began digging furiously. The workers laughed.

After shovelling out about ten hoofuls of sand, the fat man broke out in a heavy sweat, as if someone had poured a bucket of water over his head. Finally, he grew so tired from his brief labors that he sank to the ground.

The judge said to him:

"And so you see, my friend, that it is harder to work than to tell another how to work. And here you are scratching your belly under the shade of the trees! "

We continued on. When we had gone a little way, the judge looked around and was pleased to see that all the foremen and elders were working alongside their men, hoes in hand.

We left the village of Rubakho and came to the place where the two canals met: the Makhallai Bolo from the north, and the Istamze from the south. There, the carpenters had built dikes and planed the edges of the boards to make them sturdy.

Fifty paces below the site of the dikes, the canal was already finished, while work continued farther on.

The judge had ordered a high dam built at the end of the canal, and ordered the foreman in charge of the work to have the dikes at the Koko steppe opened so the water would flow down.

The judge explained to my father:

"I am arranging the digging so that as soon as one section is finished, water is let in following in the wake of the workers. When the men see the fruits of their labors immediately, their strength is redoubled. The section we dig today will be filled with water on the morrow. Tomorrow, we shall bring water to Rubakho, and the day after, to Dakhnau."

The judge leaned against a tree, then squatted. His interlocutors squatted across from him. The judge used many words I did not understand and explained them in Tajik. But I did not understand the explanations either.

Father hung on the judge's every word like a school boy, and while they were talking, the foreman galloped up with the news that the water was coming.

The judge and all who were with him stood and walked over to the dam.

The life-giving water with its dirty yellow foam rushed forward, eddying and splashing at the sides of the canal. It broke in waves against the boards of the dam and the level began to rise. Although a bit trickled through the cracks between the boards, the level continued to rise until it reached the top and spilled over into the canals leading to Istamze and Makhallai Bolo, and was stopped by the banks of sand on either side so that it continued to flow forward.

My father and uncle requested permission to take leave of the judge. Slowly, we walked in time with the water along the edge of the canal. My father said to my uncle:

"In addition to the fact that this judge is one of the most intelligent, best educated, noblest, and most just men of our day, his body is surely made of steel. For despite his years, he does not tire—not when he sits or stands or walks though he is well over seventy already! "

"His son said he would be seventy-six this year."

We reached the village just as the water in the canal did.

The boys playing in the street rushed toward the canal, hopping in and out of it, clapping their hands, and shouting: "The water has come! There's water again! "

We returned to my grandfather's where the discussion of the judge continued. They talked about whether my uncle Kurban Niyaz should be sent to work for him or not. My father was in favor of so doing:

“Serving such a master will be excellent schooling for Kurban Niyaz! ”

This Judge Abdolvakhid was the same who wrote poetry under the name of Sadri Sarir.

THE NEW CANAL IN SHAFRIKAN PROVINCE

After the new canal was dug, the peasants of Shafrikan Province set about their work in the fields with renewed inspiration that fall. They sowed winter wheat, cleaned the old irrigation ditches, and dug new ones in preparation for spring ploughing.

The new, well-planned canal from the Zeravshan River gave more water than before. But the peasants were not satisfied with that alone, and without any assistance from the emir's officials, they cleaned the old canals and hauled the sand from a large territory, irrigating it and preparing it for plowing. The peasants who had moved to the south when the sand dunes had covered their fields returned to the land of their ancestors and began to cultivate it.

The landless peasants directed their efforts toward refurbishing the long-neglected canal of Jilvan which had been waterless and marsh-ridden for years. The Jilvan canal got its water from the new Shafrikan canal which was full to overflowing, and in this manner, fields which had stood barren for years were once again put to the plow.

Within two years after the canal was dug anew, Shafrikan Province was transformed into a mass of gardens, fertile fields, and lush orchards. And then, it caught the eye of Emir Muzaffar, who subsequently appointed Murad-bek, a man known for his cruelty, ruler of the province; and Safi, who had won the emir over with his “erudition”, was appointed judge.

These two sycophants arrived with their servants and fawners like a plague of locusts and turned this rich land into a desert once more. The rulers announced to the peasants of Shafrikan that since they had paid no taxes at all for several years—and indeed, because of the sandstorm and subsequent lack of water, there had been nothing with which to pay—they would have to give over their entire harvest as partial compensation. The peasants were declared debtors of the emir, and were told they would have to pay

off this debt in subsequent years at harvest time...

...The result of all this unregulated and unpunished arbitrariness was that the old bed of the Shafrikan canal again filled with sand. The plots of the peasants with small holdings irrigated by the new canal remained uncultivated if they had not already fallen into the hands of the rich. The excess water flowed from the new canal into the surrounding fields unused, collected in pools, and turned the whole area into a swamp. Soon malaria became a common complaint in a place where it had never been a problem.

For many years, the old Shafrikan canal and the Jilvan canal stood unused and swamp-ridden. It was only after the October Socialist Revolution of 1917 that both streams were cleaned, and life-giving water flowed once more, bringing prosperity to the environs.

* * *

Judge Abdulvakhid Sadri Sarir, who had labored so tirelessly to repair the damage done by the sands and to have the province flourish had the fondest memories of those early years after his work was completed. The misfortune which befell the area he had labored so hard to restore to prosperity was a great blow to him. He felt like a gardener who has gone to great pains to prune and care for his rose bushes and then sees a herd of cattle let out to graze on them just when they are in full bloom.

The old judge grew to hate not just Safi and Murad-bek, but the emir himself and all his noblemen. Without even sending in his resignation, he left his post in Gijduvan and returned to his home in Bukhara where, after a short illness, he died of grief.

Judge Abdulvakhid Sarir shared the views of progressive Bukhara scholar Akhmad-makhdom Donish, but was not a man of action and could never openly express his displeasure with and disgust at the amorality of the Bukhara emirate. And so he faded slowly, like the dying embers of a fire.

KHABIBA

When I was six years old, my father sent me to the school at the mosque, but my studies did not progress too well

there, so he sent me to the school for girls. School was held in the inner courtyard of our village mullah's house, and lessons were given by his wife, Bibi-khalifa.

There were only two boys at the school—Abdulla from Gijduvan and myself. Abdulla was a bit older than I, and the girls had no particular liking for him. They merely laughed at his attempts to make friends with them, but they treated me warmly, as a brother.

The second year of my studies at the school for girls, Khabiba arrived from the neighboring village of Kazakh Rabat.

Khabiba did not go home in the evenings, but lived in the home of her teacher in the same room as Kutbiya, the mullah's daughter.

Kutbiya and Khabiba were the same age, and the oldest pupils in our school, but Khabiba told better stories and could read better than Kutbiya. My father said she was the daughter of one of the most educated mullahs in our whole province. Her father had taken it upon himself to teach her reading and writing, and she was quite proficient at that. Why her father had sent her to our school to study and what the wife of a village mullah could teach her were beyond my comprehension.

Khabiba was kinder to me than anyone else. She made me beautiful toys and helped me with my lessons.

We were studying some of the lyrical couplets known as *gazels* by the great fourteenth-century Persian poet Hāfiz, and whenever I failed to grasp the meaning, she would explain it to me. Whenever the words "beloved" or "sweet-heart" appeared, Khabiba would use Kutbiya as an example. And whenever we met the words "loving", "confused", or "captivated", she would refer to herself.

Kutbiya pretended to be angry at her for it, knitting her brows, frowning, gazing sternly at the other girl with wrathful eyes, and announcing:

"I'll tell my mother, and she'll whip you harder than your father ever did. Maybe she'll even throw you out of school."

"Oh, if she would only expell me," said Khabiba with a sigh, for she dreamed of returning home.

There were arguments about who was more beautiful, Kutbiya or Khabiba: some of the pupils preferred one, and some, the other. But neither of them were well liked—

Kutbiya was considered arrogant, presumptuous, and a boor, while Khabiba was loquacious, silly, and narcissic. Her manner of reciting *gazels* was thought of as particularly laughable. I could never understand where the other girls got all this, for not once did I hear Kutbiya say a rude word or act arrogantly, and I loved the way Khabiba recited poetry.

One day at school I read a *gazel* that began like this:

*Until my dream comes true, I shall have no peace.
Until my beloved consents, I shall have no peace...*

Bibi-khalifa told Khabiba to help me with this poem and then went about her housework.

Khabiba made me repeat the poem several times, then took the book from my hand and read it to me herself. She read with such feeling that her eyes filled with tears.

And I got goose bumps when she read the last line in her deep voice:

If I'm not with him forever, I'll surely die—I'll have no peace!

She paled as she finished reading, and it seemed to me that she would faint. Khabiba fell silent and closed her eyes as the tears rolled slowly down her face.

But a moment later, she was looking at me merrily with a hint of slyness.

I knew nothing of love then, but still I understood that deep in her heart was some bitter grief, and I wanted desperately to do something to ease her pain. But what could I do for her?

"Do you have any flowers at home?"

"Of course, Khabiba."

"Then bring me some fresh flowers tomorrow."

I agreed joyfully and ran home. I was glad she had asked me to do something for her. I thought the flowers might heal her wounds.

There were two rose bushes in our garden by the gate: one had pink blooms, the other white.

In the morning before the sun was up, I went to the garden to pick some roses for Khabiba. Both bushes had beautiful blooms that had opened overnight. I paused to decide what color to take her: the pink would go well with

her complexion. They were especially beautiful at that hour of the morning when the dewdrops on the petals reminded me of her tear-stained face the day before.

I picked the three biggest pink roses for her with a firm hand and then three white for good measure, and went running off to school.

When I got there, I was afraid the other girls might take the blooms from me, so I hid them under my shirt.

As soon as I entered the courtyard, Kutbiya walked over to me and asked:

"What have you got under your shirt?"

"Only my school books," I replied, then realized how easily she could have caught me in a lie, for my books were in my hand.

Then it occurred to me that she might stick her hand under my shirt, and I looked at her face with alarm. She was as different from Khabiba as the white roses were from the pink ones. And I admit, I liked the white roses a great deal less. Father had forbidden me to pick the pink buds, because he could trade them for rose water, which was used as a perfume in those days, at the bazaar. But whenever he wasn't looking, I would sneak up to the bush and pick off the fragrant buds.

Luckily, Kutbiya did not insist on seeing what I had, but went to the cow shed, and I entered the school room. It was still early, and none of the other pupils had come yet. There was only Khabiba mopping the floor. I walked up to her with roses in both hands. She told me what a good boy I was and took them from me. Two she put behind her ears, and looking at herself in the mirror, pinned the third to her breast.

Then she took the white roses from me, smelled them, frowned, and gave them back, asking:

"Why did you bring these?"

"I thought you might like them, too."

"Which ones do you like better?"

"The pink ones."

"Why?"

"They are the color of your cheeks."

She laughed and hugged me tightly.

"And who do the white roses remind you of?"

Fearlessly, with the honesty of childhood, I answered:

"Kutbiya."

She seemed to like the second reply even better than the first.

She squeezed me tight, laughing and kissing me for a long time.

"Listen," she said, serious all of a sudden. "Don't tell anyone about this. If you do, I'll be angry—very angry! So go do your lessons, and not a word to anyone."

When summer was almost upon us and the mulberries had started to ripen, my brother Mukhiddin and Saïd Akbar arrived from Bukhara for the summer holidays. As before, they rested a few days and began to study with our village mullah.

Because of his arrogance, Saïd Akbar did not like to talk with grownups, but he remained the companion of my games. He would often sit in the guest room, the doors of which opened onto the mosque's orchard.

When I came home from school and walked by where he was sitting, he would usually call me over, make toys for me, and ask how the daughters of our neighbors were doing at school.

He asked me about Khabiba as well, and I trustingly told him all I knew.

Early one morning as I passed by his door on my way to school, Saïd called me over. Usually he called me in when I was on my way home, but for some reason, that day, he did the opposite.

"I'll stop in on my way home," I said. "I'll be late if I don't hurry."

"Don't worry, you'll make it on time! Come on over here! "

I walked over and he handed me a letter:

"Give this to Khabiba, and bring me the answer. Make sure no one sees you."

Without giving a thought to the contents of the letter, I picked an appropriate moment and gave it to Khabiba.

She left the room to read it, and when she returned, her face was pale; her eyes blazed with anger, and her lips were trembling. I asked in surprise:

"When will you give me the answer?"

Face flushed, eyes flashing angrily, she told me to follow her.

She went across the courtyard to the cow shed. She took off one of her slippers, rubbed it in the cow dung, and flung it at my feet:

"Take this slipper and throw it in the face of whoever sent that letter. Let that be my answer."

I didn't take the slipper; but when I returned from school, I told Saïd everything that had happened, including a detailed description of the incident with the slipper.

Saïd was furious, and sputtered loudly:

"That Khabiba of yours is nothing but a brainless idiot!"

In a fury, he slapped me across the face.

My first reaction was one of surprise: a slap was hardly what I had expected to receive in return for my services. I was offended and grew irritated myself. But suddenly, it all seemed so funny, I burst out laughing: the expression on Saïd's face was absolutely absurd.

I ran away, but my heart was filled with malice, and I was determined to get my revenge. But how could I, a small boy, get back at a grown man who studied at the madrassah?

After the death of his ninety-year-old father, Hadji Ibragim inherited his father's house and stopped traveling about quite so much. In the guest room where his father had died, Hadji Ibragim healed the sick by conjury and told fortunes.

One day, a madman was brought to him to be cured: he was a tall, thin fellow of about thirty with a long beard.

The method of treatment was a simple one employed by all the healers and conjurers in those days. Hadji Ibragim chained the sick man by the legs to a post in the middle of the room, thus limiting his movement to standing up or sitting on the sofa in the corner. Hadji Ibragim fed him dried bread from his palm once a day, and twice daily, he stripped the patient to the waist and beat him on the back with a whip. Like the other conjurers, he did not give a specific number of lashes, but beat the man until his arm tired.

Whenever the crazy man caught sight of anyone, he would cry out: "Why am I being tortured and starved?! Am I not also one of Allah's creatures?! Have mercy on me, poor wretch that I am! "

I felt sorry for the man and tried to slip him crusts of bread or dried apricots whenever I could.

Gradually, the man became attached to me. I was not afraid to go near him, and never noticed anything abnormal

about him. Only sometimes he said funny things: he begged the sun to free him from his miseries and take him up to the heavens so he could rove about freely and see our fields from on high.

One day he said to me:

"Ask your uncle to let me free for a little while. I only want to go to the orchard by the mosque, and then I'll come back. I promise not to run away. When I return, I'll willingly put on these accursed chains myself. If you do what I ask, I'll give you the sun, and you can ride on it wherever you like."

Just then I saw Saïd Akbar returning home from the mosque.

"Do you see that fellow?" I asked the madman. "He's the one who won't let my uncle give you your freedom. I'll let you go, and if you run over to him and beat him up, maybe he'll change his mind."

His eyes gleamed like those of a wolf who has caught sight of a lamb.

"Quick, let me go! " he cried.

I opened the lock that fastened the chain to the post.

He took the end of the chain in his hand, stood up, and walked toward the orchard by the mosque. It was hard for him to ambulate in the fetters: he could only take tiny steps. But not wanting to lose his enemy, he caught up with Saïd in a couple of leaps, grabbed him, and threw him to the ground. Then he sat down on his chest and began to beat him.

When the crazy man jumped him, Saïd screamed wildly. But now he had either lost consciousness or gone dumb with fright, for he uttered not a sound.

His cries brought his father, Hadji Usto, running from the courtyard. People poured out of the mosque and school. They tore the madman from his victim and returned him to his former place.

Even then I realized that what I had done was wrong, for if help had not arrived when it did, Saïd would have been beaten to death.

I never told anyone that Saïd had hit me, because if my father had found out I had taken a letter from a young man to a girl, he would have punished me. And now, from fear of Saïd Akbar, I did not even tell anyone the story of how I had gotten my revenge.

In addition to woodcarving, my uncle, Hadji Usto drew patterns for other craftsmen, potters among them. The potters, plasterers, and fabric printers ordered designs for their wares from him.

There was one potter in the village of Kazakh Rabat who made very beautiful plates and cups.

For every new set of jugs and cups, he ordered a new decoration from Hadji Usto. The potter had a twenty-five year old son who had fallen from a tree as a boy and broken his leg. The bones had not mended properly, so his left leg was shorter than his right, and it was difficult for him to walk. So generally, he would ride the donkey if he had to go somewhere.

Almost every week he came to Hadji Usto with an order and dropped by for the drawings of the new designs the next day.

But lately, he had started to come to my uncle almost every day and frequently stayed the night with him. He would leave in the morning with a new drawing and come back in the evening with another order. Everyone wondered why he needed so many designs, and my uncle was curious, too:

"Potters usually order two designs a year, one for plates and another for cups. Rarely does one order a new design for every set of dishes. But this potter from Kazakh Rabat has ordered enough patterns to put a different one on every dish he makes. If he keeps on at this rate, soon his wares will cost him ten times more than Chinese porcelain. I don't understand him at all! "

A few days later, I realized it was not just for the drawings that the boy was coming so often. I made this discovery after my uncle Kurban Niyaz had entered the service of Judge Abdulvakhid in Gijduvan and my other uncle Alikhan had chosen himself a wife from among the daughters of a Gijduvan potter.

My grandmother wanted to take a look at her son's choice and visit her other son Kurban Niyaz. I asked if I could go along.

In Gijduvan, we spent the night in the home of the potter. At midnight the cry was raised:

"Thieves! Thieves! "

So we jumped out of bed. All the women in the house gathered in a knot and stood shivering and whispering while the men took off for the courtyard. Soon the potter came to reassure the women: it turned out another guest had arrived. I saw the new arrival limp across the yard.

Early in the morning, my grandmother wrapped some delicacies in an embroidered cloth, and set off to see the judge. Since I was eager to see the kindly old man again, I tagged along behind her.

When we reached the judge's home his servants took my grandmother's gift and led her to the inner courtyard. I was only a little boy, but still I was not allowed into the women's half of the house, so I squatted by the stable to wait for her.

From where I was, I could see the old judge quite well. He was sitting near the doors of his guest room examining a law suit. He either failed to notice me or was unable or had no desire to talk with me then.

While I was waiting, the son of the Rabat potter who had ordered so many designs limped by. He entered the courtroom, and slightly behind him strode a girl, clinging tightly to the hem of his robe.

The judge's servants and a host of on-lookers fond of such spectacles as trials and courtroom battles followed behind them. They all buzzed with pleasure and curiosity about the run-away girl, the potter's son's wedding, and other things I either failed to hear or did not understand.

I perched myself atop a ledge not far from the judge, but at first, I couldn't understand what was going on.

Suddenly, I heard the judge's voice boom out:

"Tell me, young woman, who was it that led you astray?"

"No one. I want to marry this man of my own free will," she answered firmly, but with tears choking her throat.

"And what will your parents say when they hear of this? Will they give their consent?"

"This man is mother and father to me now. I do not care if they consent or not!" she said more loudly and with growing assurance.

So the judge began the ordinary wedding service, reciting the required prayers for marriage, some in Arabic, some in Tajik. He asked the potter's son in Tajik:

"Being of sound mind and body and having reached majority, do you agree to take this woman to wife according to the laws and customs of Islam?"

"Yes, I do!" he replied readily.

"Being of sound mind and body and having reached majority, do you consent to give yourself to this man according to the laws and customs of Islam?"

"A thousand times over!" she replied with fervor.

Her voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't remember where or when I had heard it.

Those present brought the cups of water necessary for a marriage ceremony.

The potter's son and the girl stood up and walked away toward the gates, she still clinging to the hem of his robe.

I ran ahead and out onto the street to find out who the girl with the familiar voice was.

Defying the terrible laws of the Bukhara emirate, this young girl had been courageous enough to rise up against the despotism of her family and had overcome all obstacles to be united with her beloved. All this she had accomplished by sheer force of will.

I looked twice, but could hardly believe my eyes. The girl leaving the judge's with the potter's son was Khabiba. I was so shocked, I forgot to step aside to let them pass, so she walked right up to me.

However, when she recognized me, she was not in the least abashed. She smiled and pushed me gently aside:

"What are you doing here, you little rascal? Since you're the first to find out about me, you can tell all the rest I send my greetings."

The happy pair walked past me, mounted their horse, and rode off, he in the saddle and the girl behind.

Now I understood why she recited Hafiz with such emotion:

Until my dream comes true, I shall have no peace.

Until my beloved consents, I shall have no peace...

If I'm not with him forever, I'll surely die—I'll have no peace!

THE POET

I finished school, but still could not make sense of any text I had not studied earlier, for I simply memorized the

passages we were given there without actually learning to read. Even if given a familiar passage in a different book, I could not make heads or tails of it. So Father sent me to study with our mullah, the same who gave my brother Mukhiddin and Saïd Akbar lessons in the summer months.

First, we read the *Avvali Ilm* (Sources of Knowledge), a type of catechism used by the older students in the Bukhara madrassahs which explained the Islamic religion. We went through the whole book in a month, then we began a volume known as the *Bidon*, which was written in Tajik and explained Arabic grammar. But I did not understand a word in either of them. I simply parroted back whatever my teacher said.

If I could "read" my lesson freely, we went on to the next; my teacher was not in the least concerned with whether or not I understood the Tajik interspersed with Arabic examples. And neither did I trouble myself about the meaning of what I had "read".

When we first began to study the *Bidon*, the mullah made me memorize several questions and answers.

The first question was: "Why does the author say: 'Do not merely read, but rather, know'?" And the answer was: "Because reading does not imply knowledge, but knowledge implies reading. Therefore, the author says: 'Do not merely read, but rather, know.'"

I understood neither the questions nor the answers, but at my age, there was nothing surprising about such a state of affairs. What was unusual was that my respected teacher obviously had no comprehension of either questions or answers himself. Or if he did, he was not the slightest bit interested in whether or not anything at all was clear to me.

And even worse, my father, who spent a great deal of time helping me with my studies, did not think to inquire whether or not I understood anything. Every evening, he made me recite my lessons by heart so I would not shame myself before the mullah the next morning. Sometimes he listened to me himself. If I recited freely, he would say approvingly:

"Good boy! That's the way you should always know your lessons! "

I learned two useful things in my studies with the mullah.

The first was the Arabic system of numerology: nine numbers plus zero; my father explained the numerological meaning of the Arabic letters to me in great detail, and thus I learned to count and ascertain the numerological meaning of words.

The second was a love of verse. Even before I could understand the meaning, I was entranced by the very sound of poetry and loved to repeat the *gazels* I had learned by heart to myself.

I was especially fond of those couplets Khabiba had explained to me in her time, and which she recited with such feeling herself.

Whenever I repeated these lines, Khabiba seemed to be standing before me as if in a waking dream, and the memory of her filled me with a sweet sorrow. When I recalled how she had braved the wrath of all to be united with her beloved, this slim, quick-spirited girl seemed a fairy-tale heroine to me, and this had such an effect on me that I began to dream and fantasize.

I wanted to understand the meaning of the couplets I heard, and my father was the only one who could help me. He answered all my questions thoroughly, but when I asked him what poems about love meant, he frowned and said:

"When you're old enough to know, you won't need any explanations."

At that time, I did not know that there were poets living in our parts. I thought that only holy men could compose verses. And since all the holy men I knew of had lived in the distant past and had died centuries before, I was sure no man then alive could write poetry. This idea had occurred to me while I was still a pupil at Bibi-khalifa's school, and I continued to be of such an opinion until my father convinced me otherwise.

One day my father was walking to the mosque for evening prayers, but before he got there, he turned around and hurried back home to get me, then the two of us rushed off together. Father hoisted me atop the high wall that separated our courtyard from the mosque's orchard. He stood nearby and said:

"Your elder brother's teacher is about to come out. I'll point him out to you."

And several minutes later, our village mullah, from whom I was taking lessons at the time, came out with a short, lean

man who had a thin yellowish face. He wore a white robe and a white turban on his head.

Father said:

"That is your brother's teacher. He is a remarkable man, very learned, and a fine poet."

I was surprised that such a tiny man could be so important. He was a very learned man, but his turban was much smaller than the one our village mullah wore.

"The greatness and extent of a man's knowledge are not measured by his height or the size of his turban, my son. Learned men wear small turbans. Their greatness is in their knowledge."

I knew what verses were but had never heard the word "poet", so I asked my father:

"Why do you call him a poet? What is that?"

"A person who composes verse."

I wanted to ask what this learned man had written, but didn't have time, for just then the evening prayers began, and Father lifted me down from the wall. But he guessed what I wanted to ask and said:

"Run on home now, and when I get back, I'll read you some of this man's poems."

When he came home, Father took a book from the shelf written in his own hand. At the end were several pages with two or three *gazels*. Father pointed to them and said:

"These are his poems." He read them aloud and explained them to me.

At the end of every *gazel* stood the word "Essau".

Father said:

"This is the name with which he signs his verses and by which he refers to himself in his poems."

In one of the *gazels*, the word "poverty" was repeated. Father read one of the couplets from this poem and told me:

"Essau wrote this poem when he was thirty years old. Then, he still had hopes that in ten or twenty years, he would free himself from poverty, but now he is more than sixty, and still he is poor. All his life he has fed himself by copying books and giving lessons. See how many learned men come from poor families, and it is almost impossible for them to find a way to engage in their scholarly pursuits or even to study."

He was lost in bitter reflection for a moment, then continued:

"If I had been able to continue my studies," he said with a sigh, "perhaps something worthwhile would have come of me. But poverty forced me to abandon the path of erudition. So study as much and as hard as you can, my son! I have accomplished nothing, so I must hope that you will succeed where I have failed! Do you hear me? Listen to this—it was also written by Essau:

*How long must we waste away from idleness?
Lest we die, take the pages of my notebook
In your hands and use them.*

"Do you understand what that means? This wise man considers idleness worse than death and says that you should keep busy, for only work will save you from the chill of the grave while you are yet alive. Another poet writes about the same thing. Listen:

*Do not trust destiny to make a man of you.
Make the labor of your hands the herald of success.*

After explaining the meaning of these words, my father added:

"See how close the opinions of these two great men are? Mirzo Muhammad Ali Saib Isfagani wrote these words over two hundred and fifty years ago, while Essau lives among us. You saw him with your own eyes today. But they both say the same thing! Both warn against idleness and urge us to be industrious."

My father respected Grandfather Saib, as he often referred to the great poet. When he read from this poet, the expression on his face was like that of a child who has found the honey pot. This conversation with my father had a profound effect on the rest of my life.

For that was the day I learned that even in our times, a man could be a poet, but I was still doubtful about one thing: could a man become a poet without being holy, or was Essau holy and, therefore, had the ability to become a poet?

"But isn't it so that only holy men can write poetry?" I inquired of my father.

"No, of course not! " he replied with a chuckle. "Even I wrote a numerological inscription in honor of the new porch your uncle Hadji Usto built for our mosque:

*This porch was built in the Year of the Cock,
So may Allah, in his mercy, grant him water and grain.*

I was overjoyed to learn not only that my father had written a poem, but that poems could be written by ordinary men. After all, my father had written one, and I was absolutely sure he was not a holy man. I wanted very much to hear some of his other verses, but he responded:

"Don't think that I'm a poet. If a man has written a couple of lines, it doesn't mean he's a poet. Anyone with even a bit of talent can write a couple of *gazels*, but that is not enough to make him a great poet. A real poet must be able to compose verses about any event in life; he must see life from all sides and comprehend it. Only then can he become a poet like Essau, Grandfather Saibor Hafiz. Mirza Abdulkadir Bedil, who lived almost two hundred years ago, wrote over thirty thousand lines of verse. That is a real poet."

"Are there any poets aside from Essau who are alive today?"

"Yes, of course. There are a great many. Abdolvakhid the judge of Gijduvan is also a poet."

This news distressed me, for when he had been so kind to me at the canal a few years before, I had had no idea I was in the presence of a poet. Then I began to wonder if I could become a poet.

"Yes," my father informed me. "But that is far from an easy matter. You must study a great deal and read even more. You must know the finest poets well and understand how they differ from one another: you must feel what is unique in each of them. Now while you're still little, learn to read and write, and learn as many poems as you can by heart. But don't try to write any poems of your own yet. It's too early."

I loved poetry, but I could barely read. And with writing, the situation was even worse. I only knew the numbers my father had taught me, so I asked him to teach me to write. He agreed:

"Fine. When you have learned to write, your reading will improve."

That very day I memorized several of my favorite *gazels* by Essau:

*My heart gives thanks for the slightest tender glance,
I rejoice at any passing smile or note of trial.
Oh, haughty beauty! Oh merrymaking, spring, and joys of love!
I lay at your feet all in which the flowerbeds of spring are rich.*

LEARNING TO WRITE

When I asked my father to keep his promise and teach me to write, he said:

"My handwriting is bad. If you learn penmanship from me, you will also have a poor hand. Wait a bit, and when Saïd Akbar comes back from Bukhara, he will teach you to write."

All traces of the stinging slap in the face Saïd Akbar had once given me had long since disappeared. But I had not forgotten, and I did not want to study with him for anything in the world.

But then I remembered what my father had said: that all obstacles must be overcome for the sake of knowledge and any deprivations borne without complaint. Then, too, I had more than gotten my revenge with the assistance of the madman. So I thought it over, decided to let bygones be bygones, and agreed to study with Saïd.

One day my father said to me:

"We have to think about getting your writing materials together. As they say, if your ink were water, your pen a stick, your paper a lump of clay, and your blotter of ashes, how would you be able to write with them?"

On market day, Father set out for Makhallai Bolo and took me with him as far as Gijduvan.

At the Gijduvan bazaar, he bought me a pencil case, two reed-pens, a sheepskin folder and four sheets of fine Kokand paper, a knife for sharpening the reed-pens, and a bunch of silk threads to put into the inkwell to keep the pen from taking too much ink. After entrusting me with these treasures, my father sent me back to Saktare and continued on his way to Makhallai Bolo.

Atop our old donkey, my bundle in hand, I set out for home. My joy was boundless. But as I left the village, the saddle began to slip.

To the left of the road stretched out a low wall. So I stopped in the shade it provided, climbed down from the donkey, put the bundle with all my purchases on the top of the wall, and reached out to tighten the girths.

I accidentally knocked my bundle off in the process, and the smooth pencil case slipped out and fell into the canal on the other side of the wall. I climbed over and saw that the canal was dry, but the pencil case was nowhere to be seen. There was a well in the canal, and it had fallen to the bottom. I sat down by the canal and began to wail bitterly like a mother at the graveside of her child.

A passer-by asked me what was wrong, and still sobbing, I told him what had happened.

"Stop crying, boy, for your tears can do nothing to right matters."

And forthwith, he began to undress. I looked at him with caution and amazement.

"I'll climb down into the well and retrieve your case," he explained.

He left his robe, his turban, and his slippers on the wall and walked over to the well in just his underclothes.

Bracing himself, he descended quickly to the bottom along the steps built into the walls of the well when it was dug. He retrieved my pencil case, stuck it under his belt, and ascended by the same route. I was so overjoyed I was quite speechless.

In the course of a single day—of an hour, actually—that pencil case had brought me such a lot of happiness! First I was glad Father had bought it for me, and now, a total stranger had increased this joy many times over. I was more than grateful to the man. But I could not express this gratitude.

I wiped my tearful eyes, so recently filled with despair, and smiled gleefully. The pencil case had suffered very little from its swim: some of the polish had come off one edge, but the inside was bone-dry!

When I told my father of this incident, he replied: "This pencil case was made by the highly skilled book-binder Mir-Odil."

Mir-Odil was in fact one of the finest craftsmen around:

his pencil cases were always sturdy, beautiful, and flawlessly executed. He covered them with completely waterproof paper from Samarkand. After examining the case, Father told me:

"It was not the water that damaged it: when it fell, it obviously struck some stone or outcropping."

* * *

At last, Saïd Akbar returned from Bukhara, and I began to study calligraphy. Like all teachers of penmanship, Saïd would write several large letters on a clean sheet of paper with a very large reed-pen.

As he wrote these big letters for my copy-book, it became evident that while his ordinary handwriting was quite beautiful, he could not do the copy-book script nearly so neatly. But he had to make the letters large at the beginning so I could see how it was done.

Thus, he wrote the over-sized letters willy-nilly, then scraped plaque from his teeth with the reed-pen to cover the uneven edges, so by the time he was through, the capital letters looked quite irreproachable.

Then he handed me the sheet of paper and said:

"Go home and write these letters so you can't tell the difference between my work and yours, then rewrite them on a clean sheet of paper for tomorrow. If you do a good job, I'll give you a new assignment, but if your work is messy, you'll have to re-do it."

Then I would take the paper and go.

When I got home, I wouldn't practice at all, but with trembling hand, I would copy the letters out on a clean piece of paper. They were crooked and uneven, of course, but I did not despair, for I simply copied my teacher's bad example and covered the messy spots with plaque. In this fashion, I rendered my chicken-scratch perfectly legible.

When I showed my father what I had done, he praised me, never suspecting that I had copied my teacher's bad habit. And the next morning, when Saïd saw what I had done, he commended me, since it never occurred to him that without even learning to write I had learned, in a manner of speaking, to fake the difficult Arabic script. So we would move on, and in a very short time, I had learned to print all the letters.

In the Arabic alphabet, the printed and cursive letters are written quite differently, and soon it was time for me to learn to write in cursive. To teach me this latter, Saïd Akbar wrote out the following couplet:

*When you can print the alphabet well,
On to cursive you go.*

Now he wrote in ordinary script with a thin reed-pen, so there was no need for him to make corrections on anything that he wrote. But I, who had not yet mastered printing, was forced to ink in and whiten the flaws in my cursive hand as well.

My lessons ended, and I was able to write down verses, but my penmanship was awful. No one else could read anything I had written, and sometimes even I couldn't make out what I had written several days earlier.

Many years later, and solely due to the fact that I wrote a great deal, my handwriting improved slightly, but to this day, I cannot say that I have a nice hand. And this is surely the result of Saïd Akbar's erasures and corrections so many years ago.

THE ALMIGHTY HADJI

Kori Makhmud the Persian settler also lived in Saktare. He was a merry, clever, quick-witted man. When he was a child, his father had sent him to the Koran reciters' school. There, he had learned the holy book of Islam by heart and received the title, "kori", which means "Koran reciter".

When he grew up, he took an office job and carried out various assignments for the emir's regional administration. Then he returned to the village and made his living casting spells and reciting prayers...

The young men of Saktare would have parties at one another's houses, each taking his turn as host. These gatherings would occur rather often, especially in winter. One evening, Kori Makhmud was invited along with the rest.

Kori Makhmud was loved not only for his quick wit and fine sense of humor but also for the bold thoughts he readily expressed, though no one ever agreed with him publicly. Saïd Akbar was invited to the same party, since he was

respected as a student of the Bukhara madrassah. Neither of them took part in these revelries as a general rule.

Kori Makhmud arrived at the host's along with the other guests, but Saïd Akbar was very late.

The other guests, all of whom were close friends, suspected Saïd Akbar of putting on airs, for only important people make a habit of coming later than the appointed hour.

The young men complained to their host:

"Have you decided to starve us, or what? If there's anything to eat, let's have it, and if not, just tell us so we can all go home."

Their host replied:

"Everything is ready. I'm just waiting for Saïd. After all, we invited him, and it would be impolite to start without him."

So they waited a while longer, but finally their patience ran out, and they began to eat without him. In the end he never showed up.

The next day, Kori Makhmud ran into Saïd Akbar and told him, despite the fact that there were others present:

"Yesterday we waited for you more than two hours. It wasn't very nice of you to leave us in the lurch like that! "

"I went there," responded Saïd, "but then I turned around and went right back home."

"Why in the world did you do that?" asked Kori Makhmud in surprise.

"I heard with my own ears how that ignoramus of a host referred to me simply by name: 'Saïd hasn't come yet'; that's what he said. What right does an illiterate know-nothing have to address me, a student of the Bukhara madrassah, by name? Such familiarity is rude beyond belief! So I decided that invitation or no invitation, I would not spend even a minute in such uncouth company! "

Kori Makhmud laughed in Saïd Akbar's face:

"Every person and thing has a name of its own. But you are evidently ashamed of the name your father gave you. So it looks like we'll have to come up with some particularly respectful name to use when we refer to you in conversation," continued Kori Makhmud and gazed at Saïd Akbar with his head tilted as if examining the fit of a new robe. "We shall henceforth refer to you as the Almighty Hadji," he decided. "Almighty is one of the names of Allah, and no

name is higher than this one. But if we add the title 'hadji' to the 'almighty', then we come up with a name more respectful than that of Allah himself. I think such an appellation is fully suitable and that you could in no way be displeased with it or consider it unworthy."

Everyone present burst out laughing.

Said Akbar was furious, for he realized he was being made a fool of, and so without responding a single word, he turned abruptly about and headed home in utter silence.

For several days, he did not leave his house, but still no one forgot the incident, and the nickname stuck.

MY FATHER

...Although my father was strict and quick to anger, he rarely reprimanded us and almost never punished us. I remember being punished only twice.

This was what happened the first time.

My father had bought a stubborn donkey. If anyone accidentally touched his withers, he would buck furiously, throwing his rider and the load.

One bright summer day, Father took the animal to graze on the stubble in the pasture. At noon when the sun was blazing, he sent me for the donkey, but warned me:

"Lead him back—don't try to mount him, because if you touch his withers, he'll throw you for sure."

I went to the pasture, untied the donkey, and began to drive him home. But soon I decided that it was foolish to be walking behind a riderless donkey with no load on his back. "If I lower myself onto his back from above without touching his accursed withers, I'll get home in no time," I thought. And no sooner said than done.

I led him down into a ditch and lowered myself carefully onto his back from above. The donkey stood quietly, but when he started to climb out of the ditch, I began to slide off because there was no saddle, so I involuntarily threw my arms around his neck. Of course, he started bucking. The tighter I held on, the harder he bucked and reared. Finally, I could hold on no longer and fell to the ground.

A sharp pain shot through my right arm as if it had been broken or cut off at the elbow. The donkey ran home still bucking.

No matter how great the pain in my arm was, my fear of what my father would do to me when he found out was even greater: I had disobeyed him and was deserving of the most stringent punishment.

I got to my feet with difficulty, but the pain in my arm forced me to sit back down; I felt as if the pain searing my heart and shoulder and arm were tearing me apart like steel claws. I clenched my teeth, prepared to face the music, and tried to get myself together.

When my father saw my arm, he said:

"Well, you didn't listen, did you? You've hurt your arm, and it's your right one. That won't do anything for your penmanship, if you'll be able to write at all."

These words were the worst punishment my father could have meted out. He wrapped my arm in a towel, borrowed a horse from someone, sat me in front of him and headed for the bone setter's in Gijduvan.

The bone setter examined me and said I had a dislocated collarbone and that my arm had to be set. He pulled my arm so hard I could hear the bones crack. But I was so afraid of my father and the bone setter that I uttered not a sound.

Father saw how hard I was trying and said:

"That's a good boy! "

After my arm had healed and I had forgotten all about that unfortunate day, my father called me, took a switch, and struck me once across the legs.

"Now make sure you listen to me! " he said sternly. "If you ever disobey me again, I'll whip you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The second time, my father punished me more strictly.

Less than half a mile from our village was a small bazaar. One day Father sent me there for salt. On the way back, I ran into an acquaintance of our family. He gave me a message for my father and said to be sure not to forget to tell him when I got home. But by the time I got back, I had forgotten both the message and the meeting. When my father asked me whom I had seen at the bazaar, I recalled my conversation with that particular person, but I had forgotten entirely what he had told me. So I started making something up, and obviously what I said was utter foolishness, because my father interrupted me. "Are you sure you

haven't forgotten what he said, or that you haven't confused it with something else?"

"No, that's exactly what he said! " I replied and continued to lie.

A couple of days later, the man whose words I had forgotten came to our house. My father greeted him cordially and asked me to come into the room. He instructed me to sit down beside him, then asked the man:

"Tell me, what was the message you asked my son to give me?"

Then our guest repeated everything he had told me. Of course, it was nothing like what I had told Father. I broke out into a cold sweat from shame. Father boxed my ears right there in front of the man and said sternly:

"You must be more attentive. Remember everything you see and hear. And if someone tells you something or entrusts you with a message, don't dare to forget it. And if you don't understand, ask him to repeat it. But in no case should you lie. Never lie, for if you do, you will surely bring shame upon your head. Now you are doubly guilty, first, for forgetting the message you were to give me, and second, for not admitting that you forgot and then lying to me. If you had been honest with me, I would not have had to embarrass you in front of this man. Remember what I said, and go out to play now."

I have remembered his words all my life, for that incident made an indelible impression upon me. It taught me to be attentive and to remember what was said, as well as events, things, and people. I forget poetry quickly—even verses that I myself have written. But I never forget a word that is spoken to me or an event I have seen or heard about. Doubtless, my father's admonition impelled me to exercise my memory to a much greater extent than I might have otherwise.

MY FIRST TRIP TO BUKHARA

One day, my father decided to take me to Bukhara to show me the city and let me stay with my brother for a few days so I could get accustomed to life in the madrassah.

So one fine day in autumn, he climbed on the donkey, sat me behind him, and set off on his way.

When we passed Yalanga, the village between Bukhara and Vabkent, the donkey left the road and stopped under a tree with spreading branches. My father had to switch him to get him to move.

Father explained, "Last year when I went to Bukhara for the mufti's stamp, I stopped to rest under this tree. Almost a year has passed, but the donkey still remembers."

My father said suddenly after a brief pause:

"People forget all too quickly, so take a lesson from this dumb beast and try to remember everything! "

We arrived in Bukhara not long before evening prayers and entered the city through the Samarkand gates. The gates to the city were closed after the evening prayer, an hour and a half after sunset. Then, after the twelve gates to the city were locked, the keys were handed over to the so-called ruler of the night—the mirshab—head of the Bukhara police.

Father told me:

"If we had come just five minutes later, we would have had to spend the night in the fields."

The city was already dark. Only at the watchman's station by the gates did a faint light shine: a lamp of rag in a cup of linseed oil. And that was the sole illumination anywhere, for only blank walls of the houses of Bukhara face the street while the doors and windows look out onto the inner courtyards. The dark narrow streets hemmed in by the blank adobe walls of the two- and three-storey houses, looked like tombs.

We proceeded along the darkened streets until we reached the Miri-Arab Madrassah where my elder brother and Saïd Akbar lived and studied.

From the western side of the madrassah, some diffused light appeared, and the sound of drums and flutes was heard. Father said that somewhere between the main mosque of the city and Miri-Arab Madrassah, the emir was feasting with his cronies. This was in 1888, during the third year of the reign of Emir Abdulakhad who governed Bukhara until 1910. Since Abdulakhad himself wrote verse, he attracted a company of poets and scholars to the court. Eventually he left Bukhara and made his residence in the nearby city of Kermine. In those days, whenever the emir left his palace in the Arg to visit the home of one of his subjects in the city, his hosts would make a banquet. And on my first night in Bukhara, I witnessed just such festivities.

A multitude of onlookers had gathered in a small square in the middle of which burned a bonfire. A row of tambourine players sat by the fire, and about twenty lovely dancing boys with false braids sung and danced nearby. All about were earthen vessels filled with oil in which rags were burning like torches. Guards armed with sticks shooed the onlookers away so they wouldn't press too close.

Leaving the sack he had taken from the saddle with me, Father led the tired donkey to the inn and returned. Then we went to Miri-Arab, one of the oldest madrassahs in the city, and one of the finest, too. After passing through the main gates, we turned to the right. There in the wall was a stone staircase, steep, dark, and narrow.

As my father went up the stairs, he called out to me often, and I would try to follow the sound of his voice, feeling carefully for each step with my hands.

It was just as dark in the enclosed space at the top of the staircase. In keeping with the traditions of the madrassah, Father tapped softly on one of the doors with his fingernail, and the door opened.

We entered a cell with a very high vaulted ceiling. A brazier burned on a small, low table, but it was barely bright enough to light even the table itself. The rest of the cell was shrouded in a terrifying semi-darkness while the heights of the vault were pitch-black and filled with the frightening abyss of night. For a moment, it seemed as if I had unexpectedly entered the magical, fairy tale world of Tuta-posho and could reach out and touch it with my hand. When we arrived, my brother was cooking supper, and Saïd Akbar, the Almighty Hadji, was warming himself by the brazier.

We greeted each other and exchanged the usual questions, then the boys seated us at the table near the brazier, which was made in the following fashion: a rectangular depression is made in a stone or earthen floor, and a low but rather broad table is placed over it. Thick pads of felt or carpets are placed around it, and blankets are placed on them. This made it possible to keep our otherwise unheated rooms warm on cold winter days. Such braziers were an indispensable part of our lives. The table was covered with an enormous rectangular quilt which held in all the heat from the glowing coals. You could put your legs under the quilt and sit comfortably, not feeling the cold at all, or you could

sleep under the quilt and stay warm all night, for the coals smouldered until morning.

And so this was the kind of brazier my brother had in his cell at the madrassah. He brought us rice pilaff—it had chicken and lots of oil. While we were eating, my father inquired:

“Where did you ever manage to get the money for a chicken?”

My brother didn’t answer, but the Almighty Hadji told us everything in great detail.

Emir Abdulakhad had the habit of leaving his palace in the Arg in the evening and stopping somewhere in the city for merrymaking. Festivities were the rule for the entire block wherever he happened to stop, and the food for the occasion was provided by the nearest madrassah. One of the servants from the emir’s kitchen would appear at the madrassah and proclaim that all who dwelled there and had prepared something for themselves for supper should bring it to the emir’s table. The students would put their rice pilaff into pots and the servant would take it to the place the emir was staying, along with the boys who had made it. There, the head cook would open the pots, taste the rice, and choose the best, sending the others back with their dishes. The rice pilaff that was selected would be placed on the emir’s own plate and the lucky students would have their pot refilled with rice prepared in the emir’s kitchen and be given ten copper coins in addition.

This custom was known to all the madrassah students, so when Emir Abdulakhad stopped at someone’s home for the evening, the students of all the neighboring madrassahs diligently made rice pilaff, hoping to win the emir’s favor and an audience with him.

That particular night, the emir had stopped not far from Miri-Arab, and the residents of all hundred and forty-three cells had made rice pilaff, although many of them otherwise did not have sufficient funds to make the dish even once during the whole winter. But these poorer souls would borrow money or buy meat from the butcher and rice from the grocer on credit to keep from being outdone by the others, all in hopes of winning the approval of the emir’s cook.

Saïd Akbar added proudly and solemnly:

“This evening of all hundred and forty-three pots of rice

pilaff, ours was chosen, and the chicken pilaff you're eating was made in the emir's own kitchen! "

Af first, my father listened calmly to Saïd Akbar's explanation, but as soon as he realized what he was eating, his face flushed with anger.

I thought he would grab up the switch he used on the donkey and thrash my brother soundly, but he just sat in silence and pushed his plate away.

The table had been cleared long ago, but still my father did not sleep. Neither did he speak to either Saïd Akbar or my brother. He would not even look in their direction. He sat in silence for a long time like some ascetic, his head bowed low. Occasionally, he would raise it, sigh loudly, and again lower it.

I don't know whether he slept that night or not, for I was soon fast asleep. I woke up at sunrise when my brother was litting up the lamp. My father was sitting there, already dressed, ready to leave. When it grew light, he rose and said to me:

"Let's go, son, I'm taking you back to the village with me. You won't learn a thing about the noble traditions of our ancient madrassahs from these two imperial plate lickens. All they can teach you is how to go poking your tongue into whatever comes out of the emir's kitchen! "

I begged him with tears in my eyes:

"Please let me stay to see the city, to go and see Uncle Mullah Dekhkan! "

After some time, my father agreed reluctantly, admonishing me thoughtfully and sternly:

"Take care not to learn any of their bad habits, you hear? If you don't listen to me, I'll disown you."

My brother wanted to carry my father's sack for him, but Father took it himself and left the cell.

We walked with him to the inn where he had left the donkey, but he didn't say a word there either. He paid the watchman in silence and left.

The cell my brother lived in was even more terrifying in the daytime than at night. The other students in the madrassah called it the "ghost cell". When we came from the bright day light into the twilight of the cave-like room, it seemed that ghosts were running about overhead and stop-

ping in the corners. There were no windows. The alabaster grating looked out onto the interior of the enormous cupola above the mosque of Miri-Arab, and it was terrifying to peer through the screen, for it looked like some foggy, unfathomable, supernatural world.

Only at the very top of the vault was there a crack narrow as a thread through which the sunlight would pour on sunny days, falling in a spot on the floor the size of a tea cup. And this flickering circle on the dark floor of the eternally murky cell was like the eye of a beast of prey or a monster glaring at its victim.

Life in this tiny room of the madrassah was monotonous. Morning and evening, we dined on a piece of the dry bread I had brought with me from the village and some tea. At one o'clock in the afternoon, my brother would prepare a hot meal, but here, too, there was no variety, and the fare was exceedingly simple: rice or some other cooked grain, or green beans with rice or onion soup which tasted good with the dry bread.

My brother did all the domestic chores—cooking, cleaning, and washing—himself, and I tried to help him as much as I could. But Saïd Akbar behaved as if he were an honored guest. He sat whole days warming his feet by the brazier, studying or writing and inquiring impatiently from time to time:

“Will dinner be ready soon?”

Or:

“Please make me some strong tea.”

My brother always answered him politely, but I was burning with anger and considered his complacency about the state of affairs intolerable.

I grew accustomed to life at Miri-Arab. The enormous building of the madrassah had been erected many centuries before and consisted basically of two floors. The cells on both floors had anterooms. In the corner towers, there were cells on all four floors, while the inner edges had only three floors. The rooms on the first floor had only one door, but on the second and fourth, there were two: an entrance and a smaller opening that doubled for a window and opened onto the street side. In our cell, the small door was replaced by the grating which looked into the mosque itself and was almost under the very cupola.

High stone galleries stretched out to the north and south,

but even there, the cells were so small that it was impossible to stand up straight in them: we could only sit or lie. The builders realized that small entrances would not suit the mighty arches, so they made tall, wide doors that looked like portals.

The vast majority of the students were poverty-stricken in the extreme. In the winter, almost all of them wore only thin robes and galoshes on their otherwise bare feet. In all types of weather—burning heat, downpour, or snow—the younger pupils studied in the open stone courtyard and the older ones sat in the inner gallery to do their lessons.

We did not stay long in our “ghost cell”, for the owner was a money-lender and he demanded that my brother treat him to a sumptuous meal.

At the beginning of the school year, when my brother and Saïd Akbar still had some of the rice and butter they had brought with them from the village, they did treat him twice, but before my arrival, their stores had run out, and they had used the last of their rice in the pilaff they had made for the emir. So they could no longer afford to invite the owner of the cell for dinner. One bitter cold day in the middle of a heavy snow, the money-lender demanded that they move out of his cell. It took them three days to find a room in the Bazaar-hadji quarter of the city.

The room was on the upper floor over a grocery store and was of the type known as a “bolokhana”. The owner let it free of charge to students from the madrassah as an act of charity, but the room was such a poor one that no one had lived in it for more than a year. We began to move our things.

Although it was about a mile from the madrassah to our new room, we had no trouble moving all our worldly goods—the runners, dishes, and books—in a single trip. My brother carried the jug of oil and our few sticks of firewood on his back. There remained only half a sack of coal, but we had nothing to carry it in.

Finally, my brother decided to put it in the water pitcher, which seemed to me a most intelligent solution to the problem. So we poured the water out and dumped the coal in.

The two of us got it down the long, steep staircase with

difficulty, and then my brother hoisted it onto his back. I carried the samovar, and Saïd Akbar carried the books with an air of importance.

So burdened, we could not go through the bazaar, so to circumvent it, we made our way down the narrow lanes. It was snowing, and we slipped often on the uneven clay road.

When we reached the tanners' quarter, my brother slipped and fell. The pitcher broke, and there was coal everywhere. With the sleeve of his robe my brother brushed the snow and dust from a spot near the wall and we began to pick up the coal and put it there.

Saïd Akbar leaned against the wall and watched us work, flicking the pieces of coal from his robe with distaste.

When my brother saw that, he flew into a rage. Without saying a word, he flung himself at Saïd, knocked him to the ground, and sat on his chest in the snow, pounding it and repeating over and over:

"This is what you get for never doing anything yourself and putting on airs like some pompous pissant! "

And thus I witnessed Saïd Akbar's second comeuppance.

My brother had hardly climbed off him when the Almighty Hadji jumped up hurriedly and ran away, not pausing to clean the snow and mud from his robe. If before I had been amazed at my brother's pliability and patience, now I was even more surprized by this outburst of fury. Only then did I understand the Arabic proverb: "Save us, O Allah, from the wrath of a righteous man."

After this incident, I told my brother for the first time of how I had gotten my revenge by freeing the madman from his chain and instructing him to thrash the Almighty Hadji.

When he had heard me out, my brother burst out laughing and told me:

"Good for you, only don't ever tell Father about this, or he'll be angry."

"No, I won't. I've never told anyone else, and I never will."

Living in our new quarters was extremely difficult, for our *bolokhana* was located above the grocery store, and its slat-walls looked right out onto the street. Light could enter only through the single doorway. It was winter then, and we did not get so much light as cold. It was impossible to heat the room. We could warm our legs at the brazier, but our

torsos would be shaking with cold. It was so cold there, in fact, that in the space of two days, two pitchers burst because the water in them froze hard. So we had to use all the water we brought from the reservoir at once and pour what was left out on the ground. There was not even any place to bathe, so we took a jug of water outside to wash.

We still had some grain left, but there was no more oil, so we had to buy it from our landlord. He had given us the room for free as an act of charity, but when ever he measured out the oil, he always shorted us. If the ladle were full, his hand trembled so, that some of the oil invariably dripped back into the bucket.

One night when it was exceedingly cold, we went to sleep at our uncle Mullah Dekhan's. The next morning, our landlord the grocer told us:

"You must never leave the *bolokhana* for the night, because if there is no one here, robbers may come and chop a hole in the floor, then steal everything in my shop! "

So finally we learned the true reason for the owner's generosity.

I did not get to see a great deal of Bukhara on that visit: since I didn't know my way around, I couldn't go wandering about on my own, and my brother was too busy studying to take me anywhere. I saw only the Registan and the Bolo-Khauz Mosque the whole time I was there.

On our free days, my brother and I went to the book bazaar. Along the way, we saw nothing but carters fighting over who should give way on the narrow alleyways—a great deal of trouble since one of the two would have to back up his cart to a place wide enough for them to pass each other. I had only one pleasure during my stay, and that was visiting my uncle, Mullah Dekhkan. He had married a woman from Bukhara and was living with his wife's family. Since there was no guest room at his in-laws' house, he found himself a cell at the Fatkhulla-kushbegi Mosque, which was not far from our room, and gave lessons there.

My uncle had not been teaching long, and he had few students—only four or five at a lesson. He taught Arabic syntax and logic, but his students argued so much among themselves that I could not decide whether they had come to study or argue.

It seemed to me that our village mullah conducted his

lessons much better than my uncle did. In our class, the pupils simply sat quietly while he lectured in a soft voice. And although many of us understood little or nothing of what was said, at least we all had the opportunity to understand. But here, the pupils shouted and argued with each other, and my uncle shouted even louder to make himself heard. How it was possible to learn anything in all that noise, I have no idea.

* * *

After Saïd Akbar ran away from us, he took up service with the *akhund*, a specialist in Islamic worship and law, of Bukhara, a certain Arifkhan.

After the fight with my brother was forgotten, he came to tell us about his work.

Wherever the *akhund* went—to a feast or a funeral, or just visiting—the Almighty Hadji walked alongside the stirrups of his mount next to the groom.

When they arrived, the groom took the *akhund's* horse and sat astride it, thus awaiting his master's return. As for Saïd Akbar, he was to accompany his master up to the very door of the house, and when the *akhund* took off his slippers, the Almighty Hadji was supposed to clean the dust and mud from them and put them under his shirt.

When the *akhund* left, Saïd's job was to help his master don his slippers and take whatever present the man had received from his host, then walk back home beside the horse.

He insisted that his work was difficult and arduous, but explained that it allowed him to live well. He slept in a warm, sunny room in the home of the *akhund* himself. Every morning he drank tea with milk, and every day, he ate rice pilaff for dinner.

"You always thought very highly of yourself and considered it degrading even to make your own bed. So how can you reconcile yourself to being such a toady now?" asked my brother.

"The person whom I have agreed to serve is my equal by birth, but his knowledge is greater, so I am not ashamed to be in his service. But most of the people before whom it seems to you I put on airs were lower than me by birth, and while some were my equals in that way, they were all less educated. So I had every right to look down on them."

We could not continue to live in our tiny room above the shop, so we set off for home before the end of the school year. My brother left me in the village and returned to Bukhara a few days later. In recounting my impressions of the city to my father, I told him of the reason for Saïd Akbar's arrogance. First he laughed, then added thoughtfully:

"A real man does not judge his worth by his father's social standing." Unfortunately, many fail to heed this sound advice.

MY PLOT OF LAND

And thus I had a passing acquaintance with life at the madrassah. My father was considering sending me back there to study, but he could not afford to have two sons at a Bukhara madrassah. So he offered me the opportunity to earn the money I would need for my education.

There was a bit of spare land in our yard, and Father had planted apricot trees there. Since they had bloomed three times already, he could not plow the land under them with a bull, for he might damage the root system. He suggested that I hoe that plot by hand and plant something there. Any profit from the sale of the harvest from that plot of land would be set aside for my studies.

Father bought me a small hoe and I set to work. I hoed three times until the topsoil was loose and soft.

Then I wondered how I would go about making the furrows, and in the end I decided to use an old door. But my harrow had no teeth, so first I had to break up the clumps of earth with my hoe. Then the door worked just fine.

Hadji Hamid and Hadji Ikram had agreed to drag the door behind them like a plough, but when it turned out I had to sit on it to make it heavy enough, they backed out. I found a way around this problem, too.

I harnessed our dog Khaibar to the door, and after a bit of practice, he was turning at the end of a row all by himself, just like an experienced bull.

After the harrowing was done, I fertilized the plot with dung and old clay. Then I hoed it once more, and the ground was ready for planting.

I went to my father for advice as to what might be the best crop for a beginner.

"They say, 'If you've got nothing better to do, plant pumpkins.' But I think the saying should be, 'If you're just starting out, plant pumpkins.' You've never done this before, so why don't you try your hand at pumpkins. They're not too hard to grow, and they don't require a lot of care. The *palavkad* variety grows under any conditions and gives a good yield."

When the sun had warmed the earth sufficiently and the seeds had been soaked long enough, Father gave them to me, and I planted them.

The seeds sprouted well, and I had to thin the plants and mound the earth around them three times in a fortnight. Then I watered them, and when that was finished, my father showed me where to dig the irrigation canal so I wouldn't have to haul the water any more.

It was common practice in Bukhara, to first sow the seeds then to water the whole field. Finally, an irrigation canal would be dug. This was the method I used as well.

My father did a lot of work in his garden plot that year. He planted three-quarters of an acre in cotton and the other three-quarters in sorghum. But the cotton withered and died, so our only hope was the sorghum. Half of his labor had been in vain.

The autumn before, he had flooded the field and turned the ground. During the winter month of Kaus and forty days later, he again watered the field. Then when spring came, he turned the ground again and fertilized the earth. We had an old adobe wall that was falling down and had been baking in the sun for many years. Father tore it the rest of the way down and hauled it to the field where he had planted the sorghum. He spread it in little hills over the entire plot, a task at which I assisted him zealously. He filled the baskets hanging from either side of our sturdy donkey, and I drove the donkey about the field, spreading the new earth all around.

Next, father hired a bull and plowed the earth twice, then harrowed the field, and finally planted it. After planting, he harrowed it once more.

Despite all this work, not much sorghum came up; there was fully a pace between the shoots, so the neighbors told him he should plow it all under and plant again, this time

making sure the seeds were closer together.

"Otherwise, you'll just have a lot of land going to waste," they explained.

But my father disagreed:

"Remember what the old men say: 'Space for a hoe between cotton plants, but room for a camel to fit between sorghum.'"

When the shoots got a bit bigger, my father mounded the earth about them thrice, and when the tender plants began to wilt from the heat of the sun, he flooded the field.

After the field was flooded, every stalk put out ten or twelve shoots, but Father left only four on each one, cutting the rest back.

He hoped to harvest over 8,500 pounds of sorghum that year.

THE EPIDEMIC

In the beginning of summer of the year 1306 of the Islamic calendar (in July of 1899 as we now measure time) an epidemic broke out in Bukhara, and the death rate reached terrifying proportions.

My brother took ill in the city, so he came back to the village. My Uncle Mullah Dekhkan fell ill there and died. His body was taken home to Makhallai Bolo for burial.

My father did not feel well, so he stayed home with my brothers, and Mother took me to my uncle's funeral.

I don't know whether she caught the sickness at my grandfather's or if she was unwell when she arrived, but she was so distressed over her brother's death that she took to her bed there.

When it was time to return home, I put her on a donkey and barely managed to get her back.

When we arrived I found my father and younger brothers already quite ill. So the five of them—my parents and three brothers—lay in a row in a small room. I went from one to the other giving them water and milk, chasing the flies away, and helping them if they had to get up.

A week later, all the families in our village were in dire straits just as we were. And not just our village—throughout the entire region there was hardly a healthy person left. People began to die. In Saktare there were about three

hundred families, and not a day passed that there weren't one or two funerals.

In those days, I had no idea what manner of illness had struck my loved ones. There were no doctors, of course, and in a tiny place like Saktare, there weren't even any conjurers who knew anything about medicine or herbs.

My father was sicker than anyone: most of the time, he lay unconscious, asking only for water now and again.

Then one day he asked me:

"Have you watered the sorghum a second time yet?"

"No," I replied.

"How many days since the first time we watered it?"

"Ten."

"Good. Then it's still too early," he concluded, and saying that, closed his eyes and lost consciousness.

After that, he would ask me the same thing over and over.

When twenty days had passed since the first watering, I answered his inevitable question, and he said:

"Now it's time. Try to water the field or the plants will die."

So I took my hoe and set off for the field.

I was continually amazed by the intelligence of our dog. He used to follow me everywhere, but since my family had fallen ill, Khaibar had not moved from the doorway. And that day, as I was setting out for the field, he looked at my prostrate family and lay his head firmly across the threshold, having decided to stand guard over our home instead of me.

Water was plentiful that year, since most of the peasants were too ill to worry about their fields.

I easily opened the big canal and let the water flow into my field. That accomplished, I set off for home at once.

An hour after I got back, my father asked me:

"Did you water the field?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good boy," he said approvingly and closed his eyes.

Despite the fact that my Uncle Hadji Usto was ill himself, as was all his family, he came to visit my father and comfort me:

"Your father will certainly get well, but first he must have four cold sweats."

True to Hadji Usto's words, on the fortieth day, my father began to sweat, then he finally came to. He lay quietly,

not losing consciousness at all.

On the seventh day, Hadji Usto dropped by, looked at my father, and said to me:

"If he gets worse, come for me at once."

"How will I know if he's better or worse?" I asked with tears in my eyes.

"Don't cry, boy! Act like a man worthy of your father's name! He's in a very bad way and is trying to lie quietly so he won't cause you alarm before it's time. So take care not to upset him. When his breathing becomes very labored and he starts wheezing, you'll know he's feeling bad. Then come for me... But now I have to go, because your aunt is very sick, too."

When night fell, I lit the lamp. Everyone was asleep but me. Shortly, my father's breathing became labored and he began to wheeze, so I called for my uncle.

He soaked a piece of cotton in water and squeezed the liquid into Father's mouth. He opened his eyes and looked first at me, then at my uncle.

"Give me just another spoonful of water, please."

My uncle squeezed another two spoonfuls into his mouth.

Father said, "That's enough," and turned to face me. "No matter how hard it is, find a way to study! Don't ever forget that."

Then he closed his eyes. A few minutes later, he began to wheeze again, so my uncle soaked the cotton again and squeezed more water into his mouth. Father tried to raise himself up and look at me, but he fell again. His hands jerked, and then he was still. My uncle bound his lifeless chin and his toes, closed his eyes, and said to me:

"I have to go and see how my own patients are doing. I'll be back shortly. You're not afraid to stay here by yourself, are you?"

"How could I be afraid of my own father?! "

"Good boy! Brave lad! " Hadji Usto praised me.

According to the solar calendar, my father was fifty-seven years old when he died.

My uncle came back in a while, and when he appeared, my mother and older brother realized that Father had died. My younger brothers learned of his death only in the morning.

In the neighboring village lived Yuldash-bai the trader. He took raisins, dried apricots, hand-woven robes, and Gijduvan cotton cloth to Kazalinsk, Ak-Mechet, Orenburg, the Kazakh steppes and the Bashkiria. He returned home with Russian goods to sell.

When people began to die by the dozens, he began to deal in funeral shrouds, out of a charitable desire to help people, as he explained to me. With equally noble aims, he gave me a hundred copper coin's credit to obtain what I needed from him for my father's funeral. Hadji Usto said we could have gotten it for thirty coins less if we had paid in cash. Then I needed another twenty coins for various other expenses, and the selfless trader generously agreed to lend it to me if I would pay him back twenty-five.

After the first days of mourning had passed, either due to my neglect or perhaps for some other reason, our cow took sick and died.

My mother said:

"May all the griefs we are yet to face fall on that unfortunate beast. Perhaps if she had died earlier, your father might have gotten well. Now we must offer up a calf for you and your brothers' health."

She told me to take the calf and give it to Khanhadji, a cripple with no kith or kin who lived on alms. He was missing an arm and a leg.

So I took him the calf, but Khanhadji told me firmly:

"Now your need is greater than mine. People give me alms, and I manage. But no one knows what lies in store for your family."

When I returned home with the calf, my mother sent me back again with instructions to plead that he take it for the health of her children. In the end, I convinced him to take the calf and respect my mother's wish.

The old men said my brothers were in no danger of dying, but my mother's strength was failing fast. My brothers were already better and had begun to eat a bit.

I watered the sorghum on schedule, but I had no way of chasing the birds away. When the grain began to ripen, the sparrows descended upon it in droves and actually cleaned some of the panicles entirely. But the healthy panicles were bursting with grain.

Actually, the sparrows didn't do nearly as much damage as the black ravens, of which there were a great number in Saktare. A sparrow might eat ten or twelve seeds of grain and fly away full and happy. But the ravens were insatiable. I was afraid that the sorghum crop would be ruined—and with it, we ourselves. Only if we had a good crop would I be able to pay off the debt I owed for my father's funeral and feed the family throughout the winter. We had enough flour to last us for another month, but no longer. So I had to save the sorghum. But I couldn't go out to chase the birds away and leave my mother in the house with no one to help her.

About that time, one of my mother's brothers, Alikhan, came to visit us with one of his fellow villagers. He said that after his brother Mullah Dekhkan's funeral, everyone in the house had fallen ill—his mother and father and all the others. His wife and his brothers' wives had died, and he himself had been very sick. So after he was well, his parents had sent him to see how we were doing.

When Alikhan saw how ill my mother was, he decided to take her back with him to Makhallai Bolo.

"My mother and father are already well, but you are here all by yourself with four sick people to care for. You have enough on your hands with just your brothers."

So we agreed to let her go back with him.

He made a sling of two poles which he fastened to two donkeys, wrapped a blanket around the poles, and laid my mother on the blanket. He put up an embroidered curtain to protect her from the sun, and they set off.

I don't know what my brothers felt when my mother left, but I thought my heart would break. I tried not to make a sound for fear of upsetting my ailing siblings.

I looked into her half-dead eyes and saw tears trickle down her emaciated, yellowish cheeks.

"May you live a thousand years!" she called out to me as the donkeys set off down the road. They passed under the trees and went out of sight around the bend.

I tried to convince myself: "Surely I will see my mother again. It cannot be that I will lose both Mother and Father at once. She will surely return!" But still, the bitter tears of disbelief burned my eyes.

After my mother left, I spent most of my time in the field, only returning home to boil water, cook, and feed my ailing brothers.

Long after dark, I would return home to sleep, but before sunrise I would return to the field to chase the birds away. No sooner had I chased the damned things away from one place than they would land in another and continue to gobble up the pearly grains of sorghum. The pesky birds did not pay a whit of attention to the clumps of dirt and stones I fired at them from my slingshot. But Hadji Ikram, my Uncle Hadji Usto's son, came to my aid.

He instructed me to cut myself a sturdy wooden stick the thickness of a man's arm and three-quarters of a yard long. He rounded and planed it, then drilled a hole the entire length of one side, but not all the way through the wood. Then he made a second hole above the first. This contraption was known as a wooden rifle.

In those days, there were a lot of hunters in our village. They would make their own gun powder, take up their ancient rifles, and set off for the mountains. So Hadji Ikram borrowed a small sack of powder from one of them. He filled the muzzle of this stick with gun powder, plugged the end with cotton, aimed in the direction of the troublesome birds, and lit the lower hole.

When the flame reached the powder, the stick was blown to smithereens. I have no idea how the two of us survived the blast. But the smell of the gun powder drove the birds away for almost an hour.

Hadji Ikram set to work on another stick, much thicker than the first, and finally, a second rifle was ready. This time, he used less powder, so the stick did not explode, but the birds flew away in fright, and every time they appeared, we fired a shot.

The next day, Hadji Ikram borrowed a bit of lead from one of the local hunters and made some bird shot. His bird shot was finer than that the hunters used and looked like millet. All the same, Hadji Ikram used the shot and the wooden rifle to hunt for sparrows and doves. The latter we roasted and ate with relish right on the spot. One day we got four doves. I roasted them and took two to my brothers.

The sorghum panicles had turned white and were almost ripe. Then, my Uncle Hadji Usto, who had taken to his bed after my father's death, hobbled out to the field leaning on

his cane to have a look. He examined the grain and said:

"It's time to start harvesting. Put the panicles that are ripe in one place and the green ones in another. If you don't start now, you'll never manage to harvest it all by yourself."

He pointed out an even patch of earth near the edge of the field.

"Pile the panicles here. The earth is dry and even. That will make the threshing a lot easier."

That very day, I began to harvest the sorghum. Now I spent the night in the field as well: I used the stalks of the grain I had already harvested to build myself a little shelter. The more I harvested, the more straw I had for my shelter. After a while, it was quite comfortable and kept the rain and wind out. Finally, there was so much straw, I wasted half my time hauling it home.

Hadji Ikram spent the night with me in my little hut: he had a step-mother and didn't like to spend any more time at his house than he had to. The village boys who had survived the plague and were on the mend would come to see us there. We would sit and talk until midnight, and then they would set off for home. Those who had step-mothers would spend the night with us, as the field was much more inviting than their homes.

NIGHT IN THE FIELD

The nights grew colder, and the chilly autumn wind cut us to the bone. The hoar-frost glistened in the moonlight like fresh-fallen snow.

Everyone knew that there would be a hard freeze that night, so there was only one day left to gather the crops. I was thinking about it too, but I didn't know how I'd manage to get it all in, since I had over half of the field to go. After the first frost, there was no time to waste: people would let their animals out to graze right in the fields and the rains were likely to come unexpectedly. If that happened, the whole crop would be lost. But how could I harvest half the crop in just one day?

I was still thinking about this problem when Hadji Ikram arrived. He was shivering with cold and complained:

"I wanted to bring one of the blankets my mother left me, but my step-mother wouldn't let me. I told my father,

and he said that she had just gotten well and that if we didn't listen to her, she would get upset and fall ill again. He told me the cold wouldn't kill me, to go without the blanket."

Soon, three other boys arrived, and one of them asked me:

"Why didn't you go to Makhallai Bolo to mourn for your mother?"

I felt as if a kettle full of boiling water had been poured over my head, as if I were lying between two mill stones and they were crushing me. My mother had died. Somehow he had heard about it and sought in this way to inform me of my misfortune as tactfully as possible. I did not cry, but froze like a stone.

There were no tears in my eyes: I felt dry as a desert. I wondered: "What will I do now? Here I am, twelve-years-old and an orphan with three sick brothers on my hands. My elder brother will return to the madrassah in Bukhara when he gets well, so I'll have to raise the younger ones myself. How will I ever manage to get an education? I wanted so much to study. That's what my father told me to do with his dying breath! "

One of the boys said hotly:

"Why are you asking him a question like that? You should be trying to comfort him instead! " then he turned to me and added: "Look, everything will be alright. Hadji Ikram doesn't have a mother, and he does just fine."

"Don't lose heart," said Hadji Ikram, "In time, the pain will pass. It won't always be this bad. Look at me: I've been without a mother for ten years now, and I'm still in one piece! "

One of those who had been silent interrupted Hadji Ikram:

"You may not have a mother," he told Hadji Ikram, "but you certainly have a father and a step-mother... He's lost both his father and his mother all at once, so it's a lot harder for him."

"It's better to have no mother at all than to fall prey to a wicked step-mother! " Hadji Ikram answered fervently.

When a person comes upon hard times, he seeks comfort any way he can: any port in a storm, as they say. So I took comfort in what Hadji Ikram said about it's being better to have no mother at all than a step-mother.

"If my father had outlived my mother and remarried,

·what would become of me?" I thought to myself. "My step-mother would hate me and drive me from her home. She wouldn't even let me take the blankets my mother had left me. She would even turn my father against me and tell him to drive me away. As it stands now, I'm an orphan, but at least I'm my own boss: the harvest is mine, and so is the donkey. My brothers will have to obey me and not the other way round. My sorrows are many in number, but they would be far greater if in addition to everything else, I had to tolerate the offenses done me by a step-mother! "

And thus I tried to comfort myself. But after my friends had fallen asleep, I was overcome by the awareness of how alone I was in all the world, in all the universe.

I wanted to cry, but I wouldn't let myself. I didn't want to disturb my sleeping friends, for they had come to share my pain and make the first night of being an orphan easier for me. For that was the only reason they were sleeping all around me in the cold.

I wanted to do something—anything to forget my grief. I remembered a couplet from a *gazel* by Bedil my father had often read to me, so now, I repeated it quietly:

*O where do you roam, sweet oblivion? Come to me now
To banish the sorrow that weighs upon my breast.*

Suddenly, I heard the singing of the peasants pacing behind their bulls in the fields all around. In Gijduvan region, the peasants did their plowing or harrowing with their bulls in the summer months starting at about ten o'clock at night while the earth still held some moisture and had not had time to dry out in the burning heat of midday. And in the fall, they started their field work even later to take advantage of the cool of the night. The peasants worked long and hard on those lengthy autumn nights, and singing was their only joy.

The men in our region sang very well, for they had an excellent feel for the complex meters of classical verse. They were illiterate, so they passed these songs down from generation to generation. Our region boasted several fine singers and composers, Bobokul Faizullaev* of Gijduvan

* Bobokul Faizullaev (1897-1964)—folk singer of Tajikistan. One of the major specialists in and performers of classical Tajik folk music in the Shashmakom style.

and Shokhnazar Sokhibov* of Vabkent not the least among them.

Many of their songs described the hard lot of the peasants. There were a lot of merry tunes about, but the tillers preferred those that told of their trials and tribulations more accurately.

The men following behind their ploughs on that, the first night I spent as an orphan, sang the words of Bedil. One would strike up a mournful tune, then another tiller farther away would take it up.

Listening silently to that song, I felt as if part of the burden had been lifted from my heart:

*Like a deep sigh, I lead a caravan of tears.
My heart is branded, seared with the seal of pain.
And in my madness, I find naught but this wound,
Toiling alone like the sun in this world of deception and lies.
O miserable Bedil, condemned to languish far from your friends,
An unrhymed couplet mired in sorrow unending...*

When the first tiller finished his song, one farther away struck up a couplet by Hafiz:

*O gentle wind of morning, tell my clear-eyed gazel
That I pine here in the desert, no respite from solitude given.*

And thus they sang until morning on that calm, peaceful night in the wide open fields. When day broke, they fell silent. My friends awoke and began to chatter, so I could no longer hear the singing in any case. Sixty years have passed since that fateful night, but I have never for a moment forgotten it. Indeed, how could I? It was my first night without a mother.

HARVESTING THE CROP

The local boys brought their horses and donkeys around and helped me harvest the sorghum. For those parts, the yield was unheard of.

* Shokhnazar Sokhibov (1903-1973)—a popular performer and one of the men most knowledgeable in the art of Shashmakom. A fine *dutar* and *tanbour* player.

Right off, I gave 4,300 pounds of sorghum to Yuldash-bai in payment for my father's funeral. I received ten copper coins for each three hundred pounds, but at the bazaar it could have been sold for twelve coppers. The trader gave me two coppers credit less for delivery.

So in this fashion I paid Yuldash-bai the hundred and twenty-five coppers I owed him, and then paid our another twenty-five coppers in sorghum to cover the rest of the debts I had accumulated. Even at that, all my debts squared away, I still had about fifteen hundred pounds of ripe sorghum. The unripened grain I hauled home without weighing.

A week later, my uncle Alikhan came and said that I owed his family a hundred copper coins for what they spent on my mother's burial. So we gave him 5,800 pounds of unripened sorghum, which I deemed as worth only half of what the ripe grain was. At the bazaar, it would have sold for seven coppers, but he charged me two extra for hauling it off himself.

Even after paying out all this, our donkey ate the green sorghum all winter long. No one in Saktare had ever seen such an enormous harvest. That year, Hadji Usto also planted sorghum, but he had a yield of only 850 pounds of ripe and 575 pounds of green sorghum, although his son Hadji Ikram kept the birds away from the field with his wooden rifles.

The old men told me:

"Such a big harvest will come to no good. It's what killed your father Hadji Saïdmurad."

I was only a twelve-year-old boy, but I could not agree with this particular bit of wisdom from the mouths of my elders: "My father planted half the field in cotton, and the cotton died. His labor went for naught, but his failure didn't make him well. Why do you think this harvest was what took his life?" I inquired of them.

My own first crop of pumpkins also did well. In the fall, I harvested the big orange vegetables and brought them home. They filled an entire room, all the way to the ceiling. I left the unripened ones for us, and all winter long, I traded in pumpkins, observing some strict self-imposed rules in the process.

Twice a week, on Saturdays and Wednesdays, there was a bazaar in Gijduvan. Every bazaar day, I would take a sack with sixteen pumpkins there and sell them by the piece.

Each time, I had to pay to leave the donkey at the inn and for permission to sell my wares. I would buy myself a sweet roll and some grapes, then two more sweet rolls for my sick brothers. Enough was left over from my pumpkin profits to bring home a pound of meat once a week. I saved up a little money and bought my brothers what clothing was essential. With the money that remained, I bought a lamb in the spring. And thus, I became the head of the family.

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

That year, I had to take the place of mother, father, and breadwinner for the family, because my elder brother was still weak, and my two younger brothers had had such a close call with death that they were unable to render me any assistance whatsoever.

We had a small sack of mulberries my mother had dried, and one of our neighbors taught me to make halva of them. So twice a week, I made halva which we ate with sorghum flatcakes.

I took our sorghum to the mill and had it ground, so once a week, Hadji Ibragim's wife, Sultan-posho, would bake us flatcakes with the flour. That winter, sorghum was our main staple.

I went to the bazaar, cooked the food, did the washing, and darned and mended our clothes. I was grateful I had learned to do laundry at the girls' school.

By mid-winter, my elder brother had recovered. But as soon as he was fully recovered, he went to the village of Tabarion, a little more than two miles away, to become a mullah and earn enough money to support himself for the coming year. My other brothers and I remained at home. Siradjiddin was eight years old, and although he had fully regained his health, he was still a weak, pale boy. He had to use a walking cane to get around, and he never wanted to eat. The youngest brother, Kiramiddin, was only four, but he regained his health rapidly after the long illness. He was built rather strangely, however: very tall, with an extremely large head, a thick neck, and a barrel-chest which he thrust forward when walking, strutting bravely ahead. He laughed rarely and spoke seriously like an adult. He was intelligent and resourceful.

One day my elder brother Mukhiddin, the village mullah, brought us some meat, rice, and oil to make rice pilaff. He prepared it himself and invited our uncle Hadji Usto and his son Hadji Ikram to share it with us. So we sat down around the brazier to enjoy it.

In addition to chunks of meat, there was a long bone with marrow in the pilaff. My brother, as custom demanded, offered the bone to the eldest person present, Uncle Hadji Usto.

"No, thank you. I don't have any teeth," he declined ruefully. "Eat it yourselves."

Since my brother was the next-oldest, he began to gnaw the bone without offering it to anyone else. It was a big bone, and hard to crack, so my brother held it in both hands and gnawed mightily.

When he raised his eyes, he noticed Kiramiddin glaring at him angrily.

"What are you staring at me like that for?" inquired Mukhiddin.

"You're gnawing at that bone like Khaibar the dog," replied the boy angrily.

We all laughed, and I was particularly pleased by his pointed reply.

"Obviously, you will be a poet when you grow up!" I said with glee.

Neither he nor the grown-ups understood my remark, but Mukhiddin was angry at me for encouraging my younger brother instead of reproaching him for his disrespectfulness.

My desire to study was strengthened all the more by my father's words to me on his deathbed. But I abandoned all hopes of ever going to Bukhara, for it seemed impossible.

Despite all the difficulties, Mukhiddin continued his education, but I had to raise my younger brothers. If I abandoned them and left for the city, they would surely die. So I put aside all my dreams of becoming an educated man, ceased taking lessons from the village mullah, and busied myself with the household affairs, of which there were many.

That spring, I bought a ewe and a lamb with the last of the money that remained from the sale of the pumpkins, planning to sell one in the fall and butcher the other for ourselves. So every day, I would take them out to pasture.

Most of the time, I let them graze in the thicket near the

graveyard, because the land there didn't belong to anybody, and there was a lot of fresh grass near the tombs. None of the other peasants would pasture their animals anywhere near the graves for fear of angering the spirits of their ancestors or because they believed that dragons, all manner of monsters, and werewolves inhabited the area. I loved to sit there on top of the hill looking out at the fields and the orchards near the houses. I liked to read the inscriptions carved on the tomb-stones as well. One stone bore the following folk rhymes ungraved in beautiful calligraphy:

*How sad this world is ruled by pitiless Fate!
For sooner or later, you and me He will separate.
Though united for less than two days in this fleeting existence,
Fate will us for eternity part despite all our resistance.*

Another stone bore a quatrain from Saadi:

*Jamshid carved this verse into stone
By the wellspring of meetings past:
"Many, o many have come this way:
Some are no longer, and some are far away."*

When the warm spring days ended and the grass around the grave stones dried up, I went down to the bank of the river then known as the Odog or Obdog to pasture my sheep. The meadows there were part of the Zeravshan's flood plain and held the moisture for a long time, so the grass there was quite good. All the shepherds from our village brought their animals to graze by the river.

We would set them to pasture and ourselves play various games in the shade of the willows. When we got hungry, we would gather the haricot beans that grew nearby, boil them in salted water, and eat them. Sometimes, if we were lucky, we would catch a small fish in one of the pools of water along the river bank, fry it forthwith, and gobble it up, for fish was a dish we all enjoyed immensely.

But before autumn, we had to give up pasturing our sheep by the irrigation canals. All the land along the river-side, as it turned out, was the property of the emir, and the peasants who worked that land turned over forty percent of their harvest to him.

In those days, the tax collector for Gijduvan region was a

certain Karabek. This scoundrel was known for his zeal in carrying out his duties and for his mercilessness. He employed all manner of ruses and lies to trick the peasants out of their harvests. And he was so good at this that it always turned out the peasants were actually in debt to the emir by the end of the harvest. The years when the land was left to lie fallow, the peasants were taxed for letting the weeds grow wild there.

But the land by the riverbank was not arable, and no one tried to plant anything there, so the ruthless Karabek levied a weed tax on all those whose land was adjacent to the strip along the river.

When he noticed the animals feeding on this land, he decided to levy a pasture tax on their owners, so he ordered all the shepherds to appear before him. But the shepherds knew that it would come to no good, so they dispersed from the site with their animals at once. After that, our beasts fed on the stubble here and there.

That year, we didn't get any harvest from the land our father had left us, for I could not work it by myself. One of my father's friends, Mirzo Mumin, came to our aid. He took some of my seeds of summer barley and winter wheat and planted them on that part of the field where his cotton had dried up. Then he told me:

"You look after the crop yourself: all the grain is yours, but the straw you'll give to me for my bulls."

Unfortunately, the shop-keeper had tricked me and sold me winter, not summer barley, so the seeds sprouted, and the shoots grew for a while, then withered and died. The winter wheat died, too, all of it, so I did not get a single kernel of grain that year.

Since my pumpkins had done so well the previous year, I tilled the earth on that same plot of land even better and planted my pumpkin seeds. I didn't know then that you must not plant the same crop on the same plot of earth two years running. So all I got from my pumpkin vines was a lot of pretty flowers, the kind the poets call blossoms of deceit. But I did not get a single pumpkin.

Thus, that year, all my farming yielded not a thing. And since the apricots and mulberries had been frostbitten over the winter, we didn't get much fruit and berries either.

THE BIG CONTEST

After I had lost all hope of ever being able to continue my education, I unexpectedly got the chance to go to Bukhara and study.

Towards the end of autumn in 1889, my grandmother, who was then seventy, asked me to bring my brothers to see her as her health was failing rapidly.

So I entrusted my sheep to Hadji Ikram and locked up the house. I climbed on the donkey and hoisted one brother in front and one behind. In this fashion, we set off for Makhallai Bolo. While we were there, a guest from Bukhara arrived at the home of one of grandmother's neighbors, Mullah Abdusalam. This guest was Sharifjan-makhdum, son of the late Abdushukur, chief judge of the Bukhara Khanate.

Mullah Abdusalam was an assistant to the teacher at the madrassah where my brother had studied, so the mullah asked my elder brother to come and help him receive his guest. When he found out that I was at my grandmother's, he asked me to come as well.

Sharifjan-makhdum had come with his friends and servants, so Mullah Abdusalam invited a houseful of guests in honor of his arrival. My brother spread the table cloth in the dining room and poured tea for the merrymakers, while I sat on the clay ledge outside and kept the samovar boiling. I made fresh tea continuously and sent it to the guests in tea pot after tea pot. While I was sitting there on the ledge wiping the tea pots with a rag, a young boy left the room and came over to me. He was the same height as me, but paler and thinner.

With a downcast expression on his face, he sat beside me on the sofa and said:

"Maulana Jalaliddin Rumi once said:

*Never go to the village, for there, you will grow dumb,
Your vision will get weaker and all your senses numb."*

Then he continued with a sigh: "As you can see, I failed to heed his advice and came here. I'm sick to death of being here. There's not even anyone to play at couplets with."

I asked:

"How in the world do you play couplets?"

He stared at me in surprise and inquired not too politely:

“Are you illiterate or what?”

“No, I’ve had a bit of schooling, I’ve just never heard of such a game, that’s all.”

“Well, do you know any couplets by heart?”

“A few. So what?”

“Then I’ll tell you how to play at couplets. First I’ll recite a couplet, and you must reply with one in which the first word begins with the last letter of the one with which mine ended. And we continue like that, back and forth, until one of us can’t think of any more couplets, and he has lost the game. But, of course, none of the couplets can be repeated.”

“O.K. Let’s play a round.”

He recited a couplet, and I answered him. Then he answered me. We kept going for about fifteen minutes, and he had yet to stump me. I knew a lot of verses by heart, but that wasn’t enough. Soon, it was getting more and more difficult to find a suitable reply. My opponent was better at the game and could think of appropriate couplets much more quickly than I. I could see he’d had a lot of experience and had several couplets ready for every letter of the alphabet. But I could tell by the way he recited them that he did not understand most of them.

After I discovered my opponent’s weak point, I began to cheat. I would simply put the word I needed first, whether it came in the middle or at the end of the line. The meaning was frequently lost due to such alterations, but my opponent didn’t even notice.

Finally, he recited a couplet that ended with the sound “zh”. I knew only two words that began with the sound “zh”, so I tried to find a way to put one of them at the beginning of a couplet. But I couldn’t think of anything, and my opponent was getting impatient. He confused me with his shouts of:

“Hurry up. Give a reply or admit defeat! ”

In that difficult situation, inspiration came to me and I recited:

Zhozhu mozhu zhozhu mozhu mozh.

It’s nothing but zhoz— a little mozh and then some zhoz.

If these lines can be considered poetry, then this was my first poem.

My opponent tried to argue that the first letter in this case had to be pronounced "dzh" and not "zh", but I insisted that I was right. I was laughing inside, for my couplet was nothing but a nonsense rhyme, and my word with "zh" did not even exist. Fortunately, my partner did not realize that.

A one-eyed servant of Sharifjan-makhdum came out of the house during our argument and heard what we were saying. He advised us:

"You must ask Sharifjan-makhdum, and he will tell you who is right."

So my opponent wrote my couplet down in pencil on a piece of scrap paper. His handwriting was very beautiful, like that of a person sure he is right. He marched bravely into the guest room. Two minutes later, he returned looking mad as a wet hen and said angrily to me:

"Sharifjan wants to see you."

"So which one of us was right?" I asked with the modest expression of a person not too sure of himself.

He didn't answer my question, but just repeated:

"Go in there! Sharifjan-makhdum wants to see you! "

But I was not at all eager to go, for how could I appear before such an honored guest from the city in my dirty, torn village robe? Why, even his servants were dressed in clean city garb!

Shortly, my brother appeared and said:

"Don't be shy! Come when you're called."

So I went into the guest room, stopping just after I had crossed the threshold, and pronounced the proper greetings.

The room was full of people, most of them in snow-white turbans. There were old men present, but in the place of honor sat a young man of about twenty-five with a pale face and curly hair. This was Sharifjan-makhdum. He examined me intently and asked:

"What is your name, boy?"

"Sadridin."

"Good. Was it you who was playing at couplets with Mirzo Abdulvakhid?"

I shook my head firmly but did not say a word.

"You were correct. 'Zhodz' is written 'zh' and not 'dzh'," he said, then added, "Would you like to come to Bukhara to study?"

I nodded my head again, but did not answer aloud. But

then when I realized that there was no way I could do so, my heart ached and my eyes filled with tears.

At that point, my brother spoke up:

"Both our parents died last year, and we have two younger brothers. There's no one but him to bring them up, so that's why he can't go off to study."

"But all the same, he must. Obviously, he's quite a clever lad. It's no easy thing to beat my little know-it-all in a game of couplets."

Then the master of the house, Mullah Abdusalam, interrupted the conversation:

"Don't worry. I'll try to find a way for him to get to Bukhara so he can study! " Then he looked at me and added: "Now run on back and keep the samovar boiling."

So I left. But the joy of that conversation remained with me. I was so glad of heart my spirit soared.

I was glad that Sharifjan had confirmed the correctness of the spelling of "zhodz", although even without his affirmation, I had been sure I was right. I was glad he hadn't called me on the carpet for cheating in front of everyone. The conversation with him had given me the determination to overcome any and all difficulties to get to Bukhara so I could study. For indeed, following that talk with Sharifjan, all the impediments to my going were dealt with satisfactorily.

Two days later, when the guests left, I approached my brother and his teacher, asking them to help me. Finally, we decided to leave my younger brothers at our grandmother's house, while I would go to Bukhara with Mukhiddin.

Mullah Abdusalam said:

"Don't worry. He'll manage somehow at the madrassah. After all, we promised a very important person we'd see that he got to study, so we can't go back on our word."

Much later, I learned that Sharifjan was a fine poet and that he had written some excellent memoirs in verse. And from that first game of couplets, Mirzo Abdulvakhid Munzim became a good friend of mine, which he remained until his death.

PREPARING TO LEAVE FOR BUKHARA

According to the customs of those days, we had to hold a funeral feast in honor of our parents and departed relatives

and arrange for my younger brothers' circumcision. If we had left the village without fulfilling these obligations, we would have been considered utter apostates. Unfortunately, all these things cost a great deal of money, and no matter how much my elder brother and I discussed the situation, we could not decide what to do. Finally, I decided to sell the house our father had left us in Makhallai Bolo and use the money to do what we had to in Saktare. I explained:

"We don't really need that house, because we're never coming back here anyway. And if we don't sell it while our grandparents are still alive, someone will just swindle us out of it and say it wasn't really ours to start with."

My brother agreed with that line of reasoning, so we sold the house at once and set off for Saktare where we first held the funeral repast. The next day, we had my brothers circumcised, and after they were better, I sold our sheep and bought the two of them some clothes. After that was done, I had five coppers left which I kept for pocket money.

I gave my brothers most of the dried mulberries and apricots and took the rest for myself. I took what blankets and cushions I thought we might need and stored the rest along with the clay pots, dishes and the copper cauldrons for oil my father had used when he lived at the madrassah. These I decided to take with me. My brother sold the donkey, and we returned Khaibar the dog to the old shepherd from whom we had gotten him as a six-month-old puppy.

I took my brothers and all their belongings to Makhallai Bolo. And then I was ready to leave for Bukhara.



...At the beginning of April, two boys set off for the mountains to go tulip picking. Pulat Tolis's plot develops against the background of the majestic Pamir Mountains and steppes sparkling in the fresh loveliness of spring. The blossoming flowers and human kindness combine to produce an enchanting picture of Tajikistan, a mountainous republic in Central Asia. Some stories in the collection take the reader back to pre-revolutionary times, others portray life of the Tajiks today.

Biographical notes about the contributing authors are supplied at the end of the book.

HODJI SADYK

MY FORTY-FIRST PROFESSION



"For a real man, forty professions is not enough." "Power lies in knowledge, not in riches." "Better to be learned than rich." "A trade doesn't beg for food; it feeds you."

A fine passel of proverbs these! Wisdom to beat all other wisdom.

If there were a contest for the finest proverbs in existence, these would surely be at the top of the list. But the first is surely the best of the lot. I, personally, learned them all in childhood, for my late father swore by each and every one of them.

"It's better to be learned than rich, for sure," he would say, "but if you haven't got it in you to be a learned man, then take up a trade. If you want to be a genuine person, master some profession or other. Power lies in knowledge, not in riches. So if you can, try to learn several professions—become a jack-of-all-trades if you can. They say forty professions is not enough for a real man, and a trade doesn't beg for food; it feeds you."

"O.K. So where shall I start?" I asked my father one day.

"Your father's trade is the best inheritance he can give you," Father replied. "So first, I'll teach you to be a cook, and we'll go from there."

Frankly, I wasn't too fond of my father's job. Something was always going wrong. First of all, you can't please everyone's palate. If you put too little salt, all you get is complaints, and if you put too much, you get the same. In the second place, there's the odor of food. It doesn't just get into your clothes; it permeates the whole of your being. And just try to get anywhere near the sweet object of your affections reeking of garlic. Not a chance! And then there's going to the bazaar, chopping the wood, building a fire,

washing the pots and pans... In short, countless tasks to carry out before you get anywhere near a carrot or an onion. Cooking is simply too time consuming to be a proper profession for a young man like me, or so I thought at the time.

I wanted to be either a tight-rope walker or a *zurna*-player in those days. I thought they were the finest jobs around—no cares or worries... Nothing but jolly times. An audience of thousands, lots of frenzied applause, and an invitation to perform somewhere every single holiday.

But what could I do? In times of old, it was said: "The will of your father is the same as the will of Allah." So I had to stick it out with my pots and pans. I worked alongside my father for three years and learned to make such good rice pilaf that no one could get enough of it. "This is delicious," people would tell my father. "You have a fine apprentice." I basked in their praise, as did my father.

"Well, my son," he told me at last, "the first brick has been laid in the foundation of your manhood, so now you must go on to the next one. I will send you to Dekhkonboi the craftsman to learn to make spinning-wheels, then to Gadoboi the joiner, Naim the artist, Salim the stone-mason, Sangin the barber, Gulmamad the butcher..."

And thus, he continued until he had listed exactly forty professions. I thought as I listened to him that if I learned to play the *zurna*, that would be my forty-first profession. "What a clever lad you are, Sharaf! " I thought to myself in admiration.

However, there was one thing that bothered me: how would I ever have time to learn all these professions? It had taken me three years to learn to be a half-way decent cook. If each of the succeeding forty took as long, that would be a hundred and twenty years. I was eighteen then, so by the time I had mastered them all, I would be a hundred and thirty-eight. To live so long is a great blessing, of course, but then when would I find time to work if I were always apprenticed out to someone or other? Would all my life consist of nothing but studies? And who could tell if I would live so long or not?

So I had quite a lot to think about. Then suddenly, it dawned upon me that I didn't necessarily have to spend three years on every single profession. I could spend two years, or perhaps even one. In the end, I decided to master

two trades a year. There was nothing to keep me from trying, at any rate. "So now that you've got a plan, stick to it!" I told myself sternly.

My father's friend, Dekhkonboi the craftsman took me on as an apprentice with pleasure. He was also known as "the wizard" for his ability to work swiftly and skilfully. He tried to instill in me these qualities as well, treating me like his son, especially after my father died. His wife, Auntie Gulshan, always called me "son" and saved the tastiest morsels for me at dinner. My master himself thought me a worthy successor.

"If you just give up your foolish habit, you'll become a master craftsman yourself one of these days," he told me.

My foolish habit consisted of the following: as soon as he would leave the shop, I would close it immediately and run to the rope-walkers or go to have a lesson with Sultan the *zurna*-player, since I was learning to play the *zurna* at the same time. To my great misfortune, Dekhkonboi the craftsman abhorred the *zurna*. He had told me countless times that he'd better not catch me anywhere near that *zurna*-player's or he would tan my hide. But his warnings went in one ear and out the other.

One day, however, he came into the shop quite distressed.

"Don't go running off anywhere today. I'm leaving the house and the shop in your care," he announced. "My father is in a bad way. A very bad way. We must go and see him, and if we have not returned by tomorrow evening, you come after us. Is that understood?"

"Yes, master."

"You won't forget?"

"No, master."

So he and his wife left, and I thought to myself: "Well, I guess I'll go to Sultan the *zurna*-player's, practise a little to lift my spirits, and then get down to work. These damned spinning-wheels can wait."

No sooner said than done, and when I picked up my *zurna* to play a while, I forgot about everything else on earth.

For three whole days, Sultan the *zurna*-player and I strolled from neighborhood to neighborhood playing at weddings and family celebrations. On the fourth day, we found ourselves in a distant quarter of the town, so we walked from one end of it to the other, but there wasn't a trace of any

goings on. It was as if everyone there had sworn not to marry or have any babies that day.

So there was nothing to do but continue on our way. Our legs ached, our stomachs were grumbling, and we hadn't a copper in our pockets to buy a cup of tea or a piece of bread.

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Sultan the *zurna*-player suddenly. "It looks as if something is about to get underway beyond those gates over there. They have been thrown wide open to let the guests in. See all the people standing around! Hurry up, you lazybones! Get a move on! I'm right behind you!"

And I ran joyfully forward, then stopped by the crowd and began playing without noticing that the people standing there were sad and mournful. I had barely finished the first phrase when I looked up to see Master Dekhkonboi the Wizard standing before me. Fierce as a lion, he gritted his teeth, and in a rage, snatched the *zurna* from me and flung it to the top of the roof. Then he boxed my ears so soundly they began to ring. I fell down right where I was standing. I remember only that someone said: "Those good-for-nothings can't even tell the difference between a wedding and a funeral!"

And thus, I had to part company with Dekhkonboi the craftsman and Sultan the *zurna*-player.

Next, fate led me to Sangin the barber, an elderly man who was never satisfied with anything, forever short of temper, and an eternal grumbler. The slightest mistake would drive him to grumble and moan for two days and two nights running. My apprenticeship with him convinced me all the more firmly: having two ears is truly a blessing for everything he said came in one ear and went out the other. If I had had only one ear, my head would have burst long ago from all his curses.

A couple of months after I started working, I had to shave an old man's head. I had barely laid a hand on him when he began to holler like a stuck pig and whine: "What are you doing, shaving my head, or scraping my skin off?" Sangin the barber took the shaving brush from my hand forthwith, showed me to the door, and kicked me out, saying:

"Hit the road, boy! You're nothing but a fool *zurna*-player with a stone for a pillow. Such a rogue as you will never be a real man!"

"Well, never a truer word was spoken," I thought to myself. "But still I'd rather be a wandering *zurna*-player than such a one as you."

I went to Naim the artist. He listened patiently to my case, but said: "To be an artist, you must have talent, a sharp wit, and lots of patience. You must love your work more than anything on earth."

"I am sure I will love it, master," I replied. "And my late father always praised my quick wit. He said I had plenty of talent and patience. He told me: 'If such an outstanding artist as Naim undertakes to teach you his art, you will be a fine painter.'"

"In that case, I agree," said Naim the artist.

At first, he was quite pleased with me. He hardly had time to finish sneezing before I would be there with my 'Allah preserve you'. He told all his friends that he had found the person to whom he could bequeath his art with a clear conscience.

But barely two months had passed when I began to rue the day that I had decided to become his apprentice. I had jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire, as they say. For this work was truly difficult: a body could go through seven cold sweats and endless agony in the time it takes to draw a single flower. And the master painter complained even worse than the barber had. If a line was a bit off or the paint too thick in his humble opinion, you would have thought the Last Judgement was upon us.

"You muddle-headed, good-for-nothing fool, are those fingers you've got there or rakes?" he would begin to chew me out. "You couldn't even make a decent bath house attendant with those paws of yours!"

"If he keeps pestering me now, what will it be like in a few years?" I thought. "At present, he'll only let me put the colors in, but once I begin doing drawing of my own, I'll surely get my ears boxed again. No, I'd better get out of this before it's too late."

"Pardon me, oh honored master. I was wrong. I will never become an artist," I said to him one fine day. "Please permit me to leave your service."

"With great pleasure," he replied, "for even in forty years, I would not be able to make an artist of you. You would be better off going to Khalim the halva-maker. Maybe he can do something with you."

His sharp words stung me. "Just you wait," I thought to myself, "I'll be good at something yet and give you more than enough reason for surprise!" Then I ran off to ask Salim the stone-mason to take me on as an apprentice.

But luck was against me, for Salim the stone-mason had died a couple of days before my arrival. He had been a fine mason, known throughout our region. My luck wasn't running too well... And to make matters worse, Gulmamad the butcher had become a livestock breeder and gone to work on a collective farm. And Gadoboi the joiner who had been known for his fine rocking cradles had gone to work at a furniture factory. Then I remembered my *zurna* and suddenly, my fingers ached to play it again, for to become a musician had been the dream of my youth.

"Well, what ill wind has blown you here?" asked Sultan the *zurna*-player, receiving me coldly. "Are you still knocking about doing nothing?" he asked and added that he had found a job at the puppet theater, because he had no desire to go wandering about hither and yon like a beggar.

"But I can see that you're still carrying on the same old way," he said. "You're still starting one thing without finishing another and trying to be cleverer than you are. Can't you see that the wisdom of seven is cheaper than the experience of one, especially if he is a master of his trade. But it's not too late for you. Go out to the collective farm, and you can easily get a job as a plasterer or gardener."

Think of that! He was suggesting that I, a person with a working knowledge of five or six different trades, go to the collective farm and get a job as a plasterer or gardener. "Tell me something funny," I thought to myself. "A fine one you are, old *zurna*-player! Just you wait, and one day I'll be a master craftsman the likes of which you've never seen in your life! You'll be hearing about me one day!"

But, as they say, if the shish-kebab burns, so does the skewer you're making it on. It never rains but it pours, and as it turned out, everyone I went to with a request that he take me on as an apprentice told me the same thing:

"A tree grows in one place, and so should you. Go and find your place. You're too old to be running around trying to learn a trade from scratch. You'd be better off..."

But I already knew what I'd be better off doing. Yesterday, I celebrated my twenty-fifth anniversary as a cook. Twenty-five years ago, I went back to the kitchen and

haven't left it since. So yesterday, they had a big meeting and I was given an award for a quarter-century of excellent service. I even got a medal! Me—Sharaf Sharapov--imagine that! If only Sultan the *zurna*-player, Naim the artist, and Sangin the barber could see me now! And my father and Dekhkonboi the craftsman surely would be proud of me! They'd probably call me Sharaf the Wizard like everyone else at work does.

Not long ago, I sent my son off to Moscow to study at the Institute of Food Technology, and this is what I told him:

“Study hard, son, and learn all the trades you can. They say it's better to be a learned man than a rich one. And remember, for a real man, forty professions is not enough!”



1970



SATYM ULUG-ZODA

THE DEATH OF THE POET

Oh, how the poems of Shivodji, the celebrated poet of Hindustan, touch the heart!

The bubbling of springs and rumble of thunder, the crashing waves of the sea and the warble of nightingales are all infused into the sweet resonance of his verses.

From Lahore to Bombay, from Multan to Calcutta the praises of this incomparable poet and teller of tales are sung. Anyone who has chanced to hear but a single song will be forever captivated by its haunting melody, and those who have never known the delight of his rhymes are by far the worse for it.

His memory encompassed a multitude of legends and traditions, melodies and tunes, and the man himself was truly a fount of wisdom.

Shivodji the poet sang the greatness of Hindustan and glorified the courage of her loyal sons.

In those days, Hindustan was in the throes of a massive revolt. In Delhi, Meerut, Benares, Lucknow, and Kanpur, the sepoys had risen up, Hindus and Muslims alike, united in a bloody attempt to overthrow the colonial invaders. And they had the support of thousands of the oppressed, both city dwellers and peasants. The ground was crumbling under the feet of the English tyrants.

Never had Shivodji's songs rung out so passionately as then, in those summer days of 1857—days filled with hope and anxiety.

A month before, led by the courageous Nana Sahib, the rebels in Kanpur had defeated the English army. Not even British Commander Willer had left the battlefield alive. Nothing could save the old general, who had held Hindustan by force of arms for half a century—neither his experience

and knowledge nor military skill.

The former English stronghold of Kanpur, which stands on the shores of the sacred Ganges, was free at last. It was held by the rebels, and the flag of swaraj—a proud symbol of liberty and independence—flew above it.

The next day, Nana Sahib was to begin a campaign against the English regiments moving on Kanpur from Calcutta. It would be a pitched battle, and the fate of the sacred cause of liberty for swaraj hung in the balance: the morrow's mortal combat would determine the outcome of the revolt.

On the eve of the great battle, the leader held a feast, having decided to spend the day in merrymaking. He wished to listen to the stirring songs of the incomparable Shivodji and was particularly eager to hear the new ballad the poet had composed over the past few days. No one could raise the men's fighting spirit like Shivodji—and no one was in greater need of a lift than Nana Sahib himself. Nor would it harm his commanders and their soldiers, the brave sepoys.

So the poet Shivodji was an honored guest at the festivities on the eve of the forthcoming encounter.

Several rows of colorful tents had been pitched along the bank of the sacred Ganges. They beamed under the rays of the scorching July sun. All about the tents and between them, elephants and camels, cows and horses impatiently stamped and pawed the ground. Carts and wagons stood on end, traces pointing skyward. Piles of packs, equipment, saddles, harnesses, and other goods were being moved about by bustling sepoys in turbans. The bivouac was like an enormous caravanserai.

In the center of the camp stood the red, white, and green tent of the leader. It caught the eye like a peacock amidst a flock of sparrows. A scarlet and green banner fluttered above its peak, and from within came the sounds of lively voices, music and singing.

The great tent was like a palace: it consisted of a multitude of chambers, there were gilded columns at an entrance-way guarded by an enormous soldier armed with a spear; the banquet hall could easily hold two hundred; the floor was covered with rich Oriental carpets; dexterous servants passed out tasty delicacies on platters of gold; and beautiful girls served wine in crystal goblets. In the place of honor, up on a low gold-encrusted throne solemnly sat the forty-year-

old Nana Sahib, heir to the Marathi throne, and a brave and skilful military commander. To either side of the throne sat his advisers and confidants.

Nearby, on a square raised dais covered with a rich carpet sat the musicians, and in the center was an old man with long hair and a bushy beard singing a new ballad—this was the poet Shivodji.

With what excitement and stirring passion the old man sang!

“The chains of a century of oppression have snapped; the yoke of misery has rotted! ” sang Shivodji. “They who were once slaves have stood up straight and tall. May liberty and freedom reign forever in our land! The Angrezi-log took Hindustan by treachery, not strength: the lion was caught in the fox’s snare, and now the noble lion has broken free! ” he roared to a crescendo. “Fear his righteous anger, you usurpers and tyrants! The Angrezi seek traitors for pieces of silver! They look for those among us who would betray their land. But this time, there will be no Mirdjafars, and what happened at Plassey will never happen again! ” exhorted the singer. “In Delhi, the valiant Bhothoni is leading the insurgents, and in Lucknow is the wise man and knight Akhmadshokh; in Jhansi is that glorious daughter of the Hindu people, Lakshmi Bai; and in Allahabad is the fearless Layakat Alikhan; while in Kanpur, the victorious Nana Sahib has arisen to wreak death and destruction upon the Angrezi. Under the banner of swaraj Hindus and Muslims alike are fighting shoulder to shoulder. The Hindus and Muslims of our land are brothers! May the union of all our peoples, and swaraj last forever! Your end has come, a low, despicable enemy! From the Ganges to the Jamna, the mighty flames of our people’s wrath will consume you and reduce you to ashes! Do not seek traitors among our people, you insidious, shameless Angrezi: the people of our land are loyal to the cause of freedom to a man! ”

This was the new ballad Shivodji had composed.

The cries of pleasure and exclamations of assent had not yet died down when a thick-set sepoy, covered with the dust of the road, a head wound bound with a filthy rag, and spots of blood on his clothing arrived from the vanguard. He still carried his short sword in hand; his dagger was in his belt, and his pistol in its holster.

“Your Highness,” he addressed Nana Sahib, bowing low.

"Our commander has sent me to inform you that near Fotehpur, a reconnaissance unit of Angrezi appeared. We did battle with them and captured four men. One of them..." he continued, but fell silent when he caught sight of the old poet. He could not bring himself to pronounce the final words.

"Well!" inquired Nana Sahib impatiently.

"Yes, Your Highness, I brought him with me," the sepoy plucked up his courage to go on. "One of them was a Hindu."

"A Hindu?"

"Yes, Your Highness. His horse caught a stray bullet and fell under him, so we captured the man. If it is your pleasure, I shall bring him before you."

The man on the throne nodded in assent, and the sepoy led the prisoner in.

And no sooner had the prisoner—a handsome, stately youth in a torn greatcoat, unarmed and barefooted, his hair disheveled, and terror in his enormous eyes—stepped over the threshold than Shivodji jumped off the dais and cried in a voice filled with horror:

"Shondip!" The old man took a few steps toward him.

But the prisoner covered his face with his hands. He could not bear to look his father in the eye, for somewhere deep in his soul there must have remained a shred of conscience.

Yes, the youth in the English army greatcoat was indeed Shondip, the only son of Shivodji the poet.

He had been studying at an English college in Calcutta, but for some reason had failed to come to his father's home in Kanpur for summer holidays.

Now the reason for his absence was perfectly clear: he had become a mercenary for the oppressors...

Shondip changed momentarily: his face turned a sickly yellow, and his knees grew weak. He staggered over to the corner, clutched at a column, and crumpled into a heap on the floor.

Nana Sahib and his guests tried not to look at the old poet.

Lowering his proud head, he stared at the floor with clouded, unseeing eyes.

"Do not seek traitors among our people, you insidious,

shameless Angrezi! ” the words of the new ballad rung in his ears as if in mockery, a bitter reproach to the old man.

The poet mentally addressed his departed wife:

“Oh, Radkha, do you remember, my beloved, what sweet dreams and fair hopes we had for our only son! The pain of your death still hangs heavy on my heart, my love. But at this moment, I am truly glad you are not here to witness the shame our son has wrought upon our heads. It is almost as if you knew this grief was about to befall us and departed in time to avoid seeing it. What shall I do now, my Radkha? How shall I bear this disgrace which is worse than death itself? Oh, why did I not follow you to the grave?”

While the old man was lost in grief, the military commander was questioning Shondip, who was barely able to stand and shook uncontrollably. Since there was no hope of a pardon, the young man mentally parted with life and answered Nana Sahib's questions truthfully. Yes, he had joined the English forces of his own free will. He had been promised a high post and a good salary after the victory—in short, a merry, carefree life. He had gone to sergeants' school for a few months in Calcutta and had volunteered to go on yesterday's reconnaissance mission himself. Yes, General Havelock was headed for Kanpur with forces armed to the teeth. He had so many cavalry men, foot soldiers, cannon, and cannon balls...

When the questioning was ended, Nana Sahib realized he should mount the attack on Havelock at once.

“Tomorrow will be too late. We must go tonight,” he announced and ordered his commanders to ready their troops for the march.

The commanders hurriedly left the tent.

Then the leader turned his attention to Shondip who stood before him with the look of a condemned man on his face. Glancing quickly at Shivodji, Nana Sahib lowered his head and crossed his arms. Rubbing the sparkling diamond of his signet ring with one finger, he was instantly lost in thought. The guests froze in expectation of the sentence he would pass upon the traitor. Nana Sahib should order the death sentence by all rights, but it would not be easy to condemn Shondip to death in front of his aged father. He loved the old poet and pitied him: everyone present could feel that. And moreover, the grief-stricken father was barely

conscious as it was: how would he hold up in the awful moment when he saw the executioner's sword at his son's throat?

Finally, Nana Sahib spoke:

"The prisoner has provided us with accurate and valuable information concerning the enemy," he intoned slowly. "Taking into consideration his truthfulness and likewise, his youth, I hereby pardon him."

This unexpected decision, so contrary to the Sahib's principles, surprised everyone.

But Shivodji jumped to his feet forthwith and shouted:

"No! You may pardon him, Your Grace, but I cannot! This traitor must die! My sentence shall be the final one and will overrule yours, Your Highness, for it was I who gave him life. And I have the right to take back what I have given."

And having said that, the poet staggered forward uncertainly, took a double-edged dagger from the sheath of a nearby soldier, and approached his son.

"It is a sin to kill one's son, but to kill a traitor is a godly and sacred act," he shouted. "If it be a sin to kill my son, who has betrayed his native land, forgive me, O Shiva! " he groaned, and thrust the dagger into his son's chest with all his might.

Shondip collapsed without a sound, and Shivodji ran from the tent like a madman, the bloody dagger still in his hand.

He yelled the battle cry of the insurgents at the top of his lungs, rushing between the rows of tents and past the groups of sepoys, the elephants, camels, and cows, carts and packs. "Long live Hindustan! Hindustan! Death to traitors! I, Shivodji, have had enough of songs! Rise up, O Ganges! "

He ran down half a row of tents in this fashion, and no one stopped him. Even the elephants and camels, the cows and horses looked after him in bewilderment and alarm.

Finally, he fell to the ground, utterly spent.

Sepoys came running from all directions and gathered around him. The poet lay prone, his face in the dirt, not breathing. His palms were covered with wet sand from the river bank, but his fingers still clutched the handle

of the blood-stained dagger, even in death.

...As was the custom of his people, Shivodji's body was burned and his ashes cast upon the waters of the sacred Ganges. The beloved poet was given the twelve-gun salute of a valiant warrior fallen in battle.



FAZLIDDIN
MUKHAMMADIEV

THE DUEL

1



A *pakhlavon*, a champion wrestler, can be recognised a mile off. Not only are *pakhlavons* imposing in appearance, each, in his own style, likes to stress his strong-man status. If one, for instance, grows mous-

taches long as sabres, thereby to instil fear in an opponent, another develops a particular tread that makes the earth tremble and emit a low rumble; a third fellow imagines that a huge quivering belly, the size of a hefty pot, will upset a rival, even though it is well-known that during a bout such a paunch is more trouble than advantage to its owner.

Akhmadbek was strikingly different in this regard from his peers. A person seeing him for the first time would not imagine that this very ordinary-looking man had retained the title of strongest wrestler in quite a large district for many years. However, it does not follow from this that Akhmadbek was nothing much to look at. Not at all. He was well-built, his height was above average, he had a broad chest, well-developed arm and leg muscles and a large head with a high and open forehead. But, if the truth be told, such a figure does not betoken that of a strong man. Akhmadbek's bearing was rather that of a simple land-tiller. His reedy moustaches, because of the obvious neglect of their owner, did not even know which way to turn—up or down or towards the ears. And his gait, although firm and unhurried, did not in the least resemble the majestic tread of famed wrestlers.

Some maintained that Akhmadbek was a sly one, deliberately pretending to be a simpleton in order to lull the vigilance of an opponent, only to suddenly topple him and

pin him to the ground. Others argued: if Akhmadbek won through craftiness, how was it that he vanquished *pakhlavons* who knew him through and through? No, cunning had nothing to do with it, it was a matter of skill and strength, not a single *pakhlavon* had ever won glory through guile...

Indeed, Tajik national wrestling is highly distinctive. It requires agility, strong arms and legs, developed lumbar muscles and a powerful neck. If you are strong but clumsy, it can happen that some youth who does not possess half your strength but is nimble, will up and pin your shoulder-blades to the mat before you've even reached the middle of the ring. And if you are a thousand times more agile than the most agile creature on earth, if at the opportune moment you do not utilise your skill, then victory may well elude you.

Akhmadbek's rivals could not best him through either strength or skill. He would stand in the middle of the ring as though rooted to the ground, like an ancient churn halfburied in the earth, while his opponent, having mastered, as they say, all seventy-seven wrestling holds, could only wonder how it happened that he was on the ground, defeated.

When competing against a mountain of a man, Akhmadbek would artfully force him to circle round the ring, and having reduced him to total exhaustion, would attack like lightning and throw him down.

Both in Akhmadbek's victories and even in his life people saw something unusual, and consequently, the most incredible rumours circulated about him. It was said, for example, that Akhmadbek was no ordinary mortal, but one protected from on high. Yes, yes, they affirmed, there could be no doubt that some saint or other was his patron. All *pakhlavons* in the world keep in training—either from time to time they vie with equals, or else work out with barbells, or some other such thing. But no one had ever seen Akhmadbek training. From the time that he had begun helping his now deceased father and had taken up the trade of his forefathers—agriculture—he had known no other occupation but ploughing, the raising of grain and vegetables, the digging of irrigation ditches and care of the orchard... Nevertheless, when he walked out into the ring, no rival in training for years could withstand him.

True, the daily toil of a farm worker is a form of training,

moreover, the team leader would entrust the ploughing and swing on the steep slopes of the White Hill only to Akhmadbek. Over there, where another would be unable to pass with a bundle of firewood on his back, Akhmadbek ploughed with oxen. Furthermore, Akhmadbek carved the *omach*—the wooden plough—to his own taste, and only he had the strength to lift and shift this *omach* from furrow to furrow.

Once, according to a story, he was ploughing on the hill when a messenger galloped over from the district centre with the news that after dinner a wrestling contest had been scheduled in which Akhmadbek absolutely must take part. Akhmadbek refused because he had promised the team leader to finish ploughing the section before the morrow. The messenger had to return empty-handed, but he was back within the hour, together with a farm worker from the village of Dekhi Bolo and the chairman of the district physical culture and sports committee. It turned out that the committee chairman had requested the collective farm board to send someone to replace Akhmadbek while the latter was engaged in the wrestling bouts.

So Akhmadbek had no alternative but to set off for the district centre.

The fact that after four years of war Akhmadbek had returned safe and sound, also caused much discussion at the time. In the whole of mountainous Darvaz it was a rare home in which tears had not been shed over the dead and the maimed. But Akhmadbek came back from the war the same man. Once, it was true, a shell had exploded quite near him. He managed to fling himself into a trench in time, but was buried alive. His mates dug him out but for a whole month afterwards he was deaf. There was a buzzing in his head, as though a whole family of wasps had built their hive there, and from time to time a loud whistling filled his ears. When the doctors questioned him, he could only see their lips moving.

A month later Akhmadbek was back in the ranks.

When he told his fellow-villagers about his military adventures, his simple and unadorned stories, in which he exaggerated nothing and made no attempt to present himself in the light of a hero, were listened to with the greatest attention and respect. However, talking among themselves, the villagers maintained that he certainly was no ordinary person.

Akhmadbek was in a bad mood. Depressing thoughts engulfed him. How many times had that upstart Mukhammadmurad ruined a day for him that had begun well!

Akhmadbek had gone out to meet his friend Salim. They were to go together to a *tuii* (a feast) to which they had been invited. Someone hailed him and Akhmadbek turned. Easily, as though it were a feather, Mukhammadmurad was carrying a large 180-pound sack of flour pressed to his left side. On approaching, without lowering the sack to the ground, he bowed, placing his free hand to his chest in sign of respect, and then commenced to squeeze the hand that Akhmadbek offered.

"Hullo. How are you? Is all well? Don't see you often. The person who is having the *tuii* asked me to bring the flour. You are also going there? Good, we can go together," Mukhammadmurad burred on like a parrot, but all the while, having seized Akhmadbek's fingers in an iron grip, he was squeezing them ever harder.

Akhmadbek had no intention of vying with him. Courteously, although with vexation, he replied to the greetings and questions of the young *pakhlavon*, trying to free his fingers.

If someone had appeared on the street, upon seeing the quiet conversation and hand-clasp of the two *pakhlavons*, he would certainly have thought that the young man was expressing his respect to the famed wrestler. But the young man had other ideas...

Akhmadbek wrinkled his nose and realised that Mukhammadmurad was smelling of liquor. Comprehending that the young *pakhlavon* could injure his fingers, with a sharp movement he tore his hand away.

The corners of Mukhammadmurad's mouth twitched convulsively and spite flickered in the half-closed eyes. He attempted again to grasp the hand of the old *pakhlavon*, but Akhmadbek, touching him on the shoulder, said mildly:

"At least put your sack down..."

Akhmadbek's words contained both a rebuke and a hint that it was improper to greet an elder so negligently, while holding a sack.

Mukhammadmurad lowered the sack to the ground but it began to tilt over. The youth shifted it slightly, attempting

to settle it more firmly, but it then began to tilt in the other direction. With his left hand Akhmadbek lightly picked up the sack by its tied neck and set it against a fence.

"Son..." he said, gazing straight into Mukhammadmurad's eyes. He was intending to take advantage of the rights of a senior and give the young *pakhlavon* the good advice not to imbibe spirits. Some drink to be merry, others, let's be honest, to feel themselves to be more intelligent and stronger. Mukhammadmurad was indubitably a real *pakhlavon*, and he should not drink on either the first or second count. This is what Akhmadbek wanted to say, wishing the young man well from the bottom of his heart, but when he saw Mukhammadmurad's eyes, the words stuck in his throat. An expression of frank hatred could be seen in the young *pakhlavon*'s gaze and a mocking smile played over his lips. Akhmadbek's good mood vanished. A dark cloud enveloped his soul. As though here and now, this very moment, a great misfortune had occurred and the bulwark of his serenity had suddenly collapsed...

3

Akhmadbek arrived at the *tuii* together with Salim-muallim. They were childhood friends. Salim graduated from a teacher's training college in Garm, became a teacher, then after completing an institute by correspondence was appointed director of the school and subsequently was elected chairman of the village soviet, but still, the two remained fast friends. He had long ago stopped teaching, but he was still called Salim-muallim—Salim the teacher.

The friends were conducted to the *aivan*, the open veranda, and seated among the most honoured guests. Sweets, fruit and other dainties were brought to them on salvers.

The *tuii* began in the morning, but the guests invited for the evening were considered especially esteemed and the master of the house did his utmost to ensure that they had an enjoyable time.

The youth had settled on low benches under a large spreading mulberry tree. The agronomist occupied the place of honour, the teacher and veterinarian were ranged on either side of him, followed by fellows that usually hung around the collective farm headquarters and were considered

the village's youth activists. Among them was Mukhammadmurad. He was talking loudly about wrestling matches in Dyushanbe and other cities.

The voices of the young grew louder. Amateur singers took the centre of the courtyard in turn and sang, accompanying themselves on the *doira*, *rubab* or *dombra*. In imitation of city performers, they strolled among the guests while singing.

Akhmadbek was not in the mood for songs. Apparently, he was thinking, with the years the reins of control over one's feelings weaken. Some ten years ago, or even five, if someone insulted him, he was able to calm himself. Even the fingers of one's hand are unlike each other, he thought. He recalled the folk saying: "If a scoundrel is sitting higher than an honourable man, that is not so terrible; garbage floats on the surface of water while a pearl lies on the bottom." Yes, a few years ago he would have easily curbed his feelings, but now, alas, let anyone upset him and for a whole week he was out of sorts.

What did this Mukhammadmurad want, anyhow? He had defeated everyone in the region, had received prizes and thanks, or as they said these days, certificates of honour, in all three neighbouring districts; he had gone several times to Dyushanbe, once he had been sent to the Kirghiz republic, to Frunze, if memory served right... What more did he need? To pin Akhmadbek to the ground and do so publicly, in front of all the good people!

But it had been four years already since Akhmadbek had given up wrestling and he considered it immodest to take part in the bouts again. Wrestling was a young man's business. The *pakhlavons* who were his contemporaries had long ago left the ring. After all, wrestling too has its own unwritten laws.

But perhaps one shouldn't bother about rules and simply teach the ignorant lout a lesson? Last year there had been two opportunities to do so. Although the first one was not altogether suitable. Akhmadbek was returning from the hospital, depressed by the illness of his wife. A wrestling contest was underway on the sports grounds of the district centre. With a martial air Mukhammadmurad was measuring the ring in leaps and bounds, challenging all comers. The trousers of his track suit were rolled up to the knees, revealing muscular calves. In bare feet he hopped over the

grassy expanse, soft as a carpet, and the bottom of his short vest fluttered in the breeze, making him resemble a fighting cock before combat. From time to time he pulled off his skull-cap and fanned his sweaty face with it, meanwhile casting challenging glances in all directions. It was obvious that before this he had already beaten several rivals and now in expectation of a fresh opponent was circling the ring, ready for a bout. However, no one dared to take up the challenge.

Noticing Akhmadbek, Mukhammadmurad greeted him with a half-bow and, with unconcealed pride, stuck his nose in the air, fixing a significant stare on the old *pakhlavon*.

"Good for you, son, never tire! " Akhmadbek said loudly and went his way.

On the other occasion, Salim-*muallim* had brought him to the same place. The main referee scooted the kids away from the only wooden bench standing in the shade of a plane tree and seated the honourable visitors. That was not long before the October holidays. Some thirty wrestlers, who had gathered from the whole district, were competing. The victors were awarded transistor radios, watches, suits, robes and various other prizes.

Mukhammadmurad had vanquished his last rival. Then pinned down another two or three lads from remote mountain villages who dared try their prowess against him. Then he began to leap about the ring. Like a stallion circling round the stake he is tethered to, so Mukhammadmurad, his nostrils dilated, circled the ring. As was his wont, he fanned himself with his skull-cap. The young wrestler had a powerful neck and his biceps could be compared to early melons. The muscles of his arms, legs, neck, chest rippled and played with every movement. Drops of perspiration on his body glistened in the rays of the setting sun.

No challenger appeared and Mukhammadmurad went up to the table covered with red cloth, bent towards the judges and whispered something. In reply the chairman of the physical culture committee shrugged.

Not anticipating anything, Akhmadbek was conversing with Salim-*muallim* when he heard at his very ear:

"Akhmadbek-*aka*! Akhmadbek-*aka*! " the chief referee repeated, halting by the bench on which the two friends were sitting. "Mukhammadmurad inquires, is it true that you have resolved never to wrestle again?"

Akhmadbek flushed. So that is what those whisperings and shruggings were all about! The young wrestler did not look as though he lacked wits, but in fact... Well, as the people say, whatever happens is all for the best... Now he had no choice, he would accept the challenge...

But Salim-*muallim* placed a hand on his shoulder and without allowing him to rise, addressed the referee:

"Akhmadbek has not been wrestling for a long time, you know that perfectly well! So why do you ask? Good Lord, were you born yesterday?"

Muttering apologies, the chief referee returned to his place and declared the wrestling competition closed.

The spectators began to disperse.

Surrounded by a crowd of admirers, Mukhammadmurad did not even glance in Akhmadbek's direction when he passed. He was presented with a watch and a robe and in an intentionally loud voice he declared:

"Every time they give me a watch! I may as well open a watch shop."

Salim-*muallim* walked beside the moody Akhmadbek and with jokes and sallies tried to cheer up his friend.

"Well, what are you looking so sour about? The man's got grandsons already and he still wants to wrestle! If you cannot get it out of your system then wrestle with me."

"With you?"

"Why not? Have you forgotten how you and I wrestled in childhood? I remember that two or three times I even succeeded in pinning you down both shoulders..."

Akhmadbek couldn't help laughing and in the same joking tone replied:

"True enough, but that was in childhood..."

4

The *shurpa*, the spicy meat soup, had long been eaten. The young singers, *hafizes*, continued to sing. Merry-makers competed in witticisms. The elderly people sitting on the veranda exchanged memories of the past. In the youth circle the subject of conversation changed from one minute to the next. Among their voices the stentorian tones of Mukhammadmurad stood out.

"Amusing fellow," Salim-*muallim* commented, indicating

that quarter. "He's got the idea in his head to vie with you."

"Yes," Akhmadbek confirmed.

"I don't like it, I'll have a talk with him tomorrow."

"What are you going to say to him?"

"Don't worry, I know what to say."

All of a sudden Akhmadbek guessed what his friend was thinking. When all is said and done, all his life Akhmadbek had worked the land, and farmers are artless folk. Only now did he realise what Salim-*muallim* was thinking: of Akhmadbek the *pakhlavon* all that was left was past glory! That was why last year, on the eve of the October holidays, he had not allowed Akhmadbek to enter the ring and that was why he now intended to have a talk with Mukhammadmurad and pound some sense into him, warn him to stop provoking Akhmadbek. Thank God that he had not yet got around to telling his friend about this morning's incident in the street, while he had been waiting for him, otherwise Salim would call Mukhammadmurad into the village soviet and pin his ears back. What a disgrace that would have been!

"Salim," Akhmadbek said to his friend in a low voice, so as to be inaudible to others, "there's something I want to tell you..."

"Speak, I am listening."

"You know my brother-in-law, I believe? Yes, the butcher. He has an interesting knack... If you, for instance, wish to have a sheep, a cow or a calf butchered, he insists on being shown the animal first. He will grab a sheep by the scruff of the neck, raise it off the ground, then lower it and feel it all over. If it's a cow or a calf he will feel its chest, then take it by the crest, shake it and say: your animal weighs so much, there is so much meat and so much fat. Afterwards, if you care to weigh the meat and fat, you will find that he is right within the kilogramme."

"I know a man like that. All Narzi the miller has to do is look at a sack of grain and he can tell you the weight more accurately than scales."

"Good man! So you have understood..."

"Still, what did you wish to say?"

"When I wrestled, I could evaluate the strength of my opponent at first glance."

"And now?"

For a munit Akhmadbek sat in silence, then he said:

"I still can."

"And can you teach him a lesson?" Salim-muallim nodded in the direction where the young people were sitting. "What's the problem?"

"He is an envious person. Until now I couldn't bring myself to say it. He is full of envy. Not yet twenty, so young, but so much malice in him. I glance at him, I see how much he loathes me, and my heart grows heavy..."

"You are a strange person, Akhmadbek!"

"Well, let us say a person of our own age was such an envious one... I would say, go with Allah. He will die as he lived... But what does one do with a twenty-year-old filled with envy? His eyes are black. Imagine, black eyes, which the great poets compared to prunes and other fine things; but his are searing like wasps, like the tail of a scorpion..."

"Yes, his gaze is oppressive," Salim-muallim agreed and fell silent, reflecting. "Somehow an unpleasant gaze. But you too are an odd-ball! People are different, after all. Do you expect all *pakhlavons* to be as just and honourable as Navruz?"

"I don't know... I can't explain what is in my heart."

The pilaf was served. Akhmadbek took out his knife and began to cut the meat. At this moment the son of the master of the house approached him. On the palm of his hand he held a thin slice of unleavened bread with a large marrow-bone covered with meat in its centre...

"For Uncle Akhmadbek," the boy said with embarrassment. His behaviour made it obvious that he was carrying out such an assignment for the first time.

"Who sent it?" inquired Salim-muallim, accepting the treat.

"Mukhammadmurad," the boy replied.

The friends exchanged significant glances.

5

Akhmadbek left the *tuii* in a depressed frame of mind. He felt like being alone, thinking things over...

A late moon silvered the mountain peaks. In the moonlight the straw scattered on the threshing ground gleamed, like polished amber. Myriads of crickets launched into their dreary song and against the background of their monotonous chirping the sounds of the *dombra* and *rubab* which

carried from the village sounded far-off and strange to Akhmadbek.

The old watchman was sleeping on a narrow iron cot near the threshing machine. For the past two weeks Akhmadbek had been toiling whole days on this threshing floor and sometimes in the evenings he would drop in to spend an hour or two chatting to the old man.

Seeing that the watchman was sleeping, he headed for the spreading elm tree whose cool shade in the daytime made it a wonderful place to rest, and there he sat down. All threshing grounds possess a good quality: no matter how heavy one's heart, you sit there for an hour or so and you calm down and feel better.

But tonight Akhmadbek's dark thoughts would not be dispelled. Mukhammadmurad's insulting hand-shake, his eyes full of hostility, the fact that at the *tuii*, in front of all, he had sent him a marrow-bone, crudely hinting that Akhmadbek's strength was failing and he needed a stimulant—all this gave him no peace, no matter how he tried to drive the thoughts away.

"The lad has become intoxicated with fame... 'Stardom' has turned his head," Akhmadbek muttered with a sigh. "It's true what Salim says, people are all different, each to his own..."

Certain scenes of his own youth revived in Akhmadbek's memory. He recalled his encounter with Navruz.

In those years Navruz was a celebrated strong-man. His name resounded throughout Darvaz. Although at that time Akhmadbek was still a novice, rumours of his victories had reached the ears of wrestlers in neighbouring districts. Perhaps the reason for Akhmadbek's early fame was that the wrestling matches had taken place at the very height of the construction of the Great Pamir Highway and he had won his first victory during the holiday of the road-builders. And that which happens on the road, becomes common knowledge more quickly than usual. Thousands of people from all parts of Tajikistan had assembled for the construction, and national wrestling was a favourite entertainment of the builders.

One day Akhmadbek was leading his lame stallion to the vet in the Upper village. Even though the horse found it difficult to use his injured foot, Akhmadbek led him off the road onto a path which wound above the Vanch, to avoid

meeting anyone. Every chance wayfarer was bound to ask how and when the horse had gone lame, whether Akhmadbek had gathered a certain herb growing on a certain slope, had he made a poultice and applied it to the stallion's leg, had he tried the curative waters of a spring which flowed somewhere, and so on and so forth.

At a turn in the path Akhmadbek suddenly came to a halt. The horse, following after him, pushed his soft muzzle into Akhmadbek's neck, his breath hot, as though asking why they had stopped.

About thirty steps away, under a nut tree beside a spring, a man was praying on a spread-out sash. He was on his knees facing Akhmadbek, head lowered, lips moving soundlessly. Custom forbids interrupting prayers. Akhmadbek threw the reins over the nearest bush and perched on a rock to wait until the stranger had finished his prayers.

After a while a voice sounded from the direction of the spring:

"Eh, son, come over here! "

The stranger, having spread the cloth in another place, was taking out of his travelling bag sweet flat-cakes, dried apricots, raisins, hard-boiled eggs and other eatables. Then he straightened up and Akhmadbek at once realised that before him was a *pakhlavon*.

They greeted each other. Inquired after each other's health.

"Are you from that village?" the stranger asked, indicating the direction from which Akhmadbek had come.

"Yes."

"Share my meal, son. When I am alone the food does not go down well."

The stranger was extremely cordial and spoke with a sweet and kind smile, so Akhmadbek, although he was in a hurry, could not refuse him.

They sat down and began to eat, dipping the tasty, rich flatcakes into the waters of the spring which, crossing the path, ran down to the Vanch.

The bay, favouring his sore leg, snorted impatiently from time to time, shaking his head and looking piteously at his master.

The wayfarer asked Akhmadbek the name of their collective farm chairman and inquired after the health of the village *aksakals*. Akhmadbek did his best to answer in detail.

"Several years ago I visited at your village," the stranger commented. "A nice place, and the climate is mild, and the people are warm-hearted and hospitable." After chewing on a flatcake softened in water, he suddenly asked: "Do you know Akhmadbek?"

"Which Akhmadbek?" The young man's heart began to pound.

"Why, do you have several Akhmadbeks?"

"Only one among adults."

Realising his slip, Akhmadbek flushed painfully. Luckily, at that moment the traveller was rummaging in his bag and was not looking at his companion.

"He's the one I have in mind, the *pakhlavon*."

"He's alive and well..."

"They say he's strong and agile?"

"He has strength, but he's young yet..." Akhmadbek mumbled, not knowing what to do with himself for shame: speaking of himself in the third person as though about a stranger.

"Eh, son; wrestling and youth go well together."

"Who knows..."

"You're a wrestler too, brother, I realised that right away... What is your name?"

Despite Akhmadbek's sincerest wish, the conversation had taken such a turn that he had not lied, neither had he told the truth, and if he now told the stranger his name, the latter would have every right to take offence; if, on the other hand, he gave a false name, he would sink even deeper into the morass of deceit...

"I sometimes enter the ring," Akhmadbek said uncomfortably, praying to Allah that the stranger would not repeat his question.

"Have you wrestled with Akhmadbek? I suppose he threw you?"

"We were evenly matched."

"Is that so?" the stranger exclaimed and rose from his seat.

Akhmadbek also rose to his feet. The stranger searchingly examined him from head to toe, a warm smile lit up his face and he said:

"Shall we have a go, son?"

"Now? But I..." Akhmadbek said falteringly, glancing at his horse.

"Never mind, it won't take long," the stranger insisted with the same beaming smile. No doubt he was smiling at himself, because really, it was unheard of, to challenge the first passerby, with no witnesses...

"Just like that? Here?"

"Yes, right here. What's wrong with it? We'll just limber up a bit." And squatting down beside the cloth on which he had spread the food, he recited the postprandial prayer of thanksgiving.

Akhmadbek also made the gesture of running his hands over his face and said "amen".

"I see you have no belt-scarf," the stranger said. He shook the crumbs from the sash, folded it and wrapped it round his waist. Then he took a new yellow silk cloth from his travelling bag, with a skilful movement twisted it and handed it to Akhmadbek. "Here, belt yourself."

Akhmadbek continued to gaze at him in confusion.

"Eh, you, I see you're a modest one," the stranger said, placing the cloth round Akhmadbek's waist. He was about to tie the knot, but saying, "Thank you, I'll do it myself," Akhmadbek knotted it himself.

The winning manners and goodwill of the wayfarer touched Akhmadbek. He had never met a person before who from the first instant of acquaintance had subjugated him to his will through friendliness and kindness.

They began to wrestle. Akhmadbek at once saw that in strength and knowledge of various holds his opponent far surpassed anyone with whom he had hitherto vied. And the stranger, apparently, realised that the seeming simplicity of the lad was deceptive and he had not yet shown everything that he was capable of. It became clear to him that the young wrestler was forged of steel sinews.

"Wait a moment," said the stranger, and after Akhmadbek had released his belt, suggested: "Let's take off our boots and go up to higher ground. I saw a flat space there."

On the new site the bout continued for some ten minutes. Either because the stranger was much to his liking and he did not want to humiliate him, or because he had not yet recovered from the surprise of the challenge, but Akhmadbek did not put his full strength into the match. He was on guard to ensure that he was not caught unawares by the skilful manoeuvres of his opponent, who, Akhmadbek was now convinced, was a highly experienced wrestler. Only once was

he caught napping—when the other, as though bored with the drawn-out bout, pulled Akhmadbek strongly towards himself, simultaneously kicking him under the knee so as to topple him. Had Akhmadbek been standing straight, he would surely have fallen. Luckily, he was bending forward and merely rocked to the right but managed to retain his footing. And then, gripping his opponent's belt firmly, straining, he lifted him above his head and then carefully set him down on the ground.

Besides the genial smile, an expression of surprise appeared on the stranger's face.

6

When he returned home from the vet's that evening, Akhmadbek found a houseful of visitors. Someone took the reins from his hands and led the horse off to his stall. His father handed Akhmadbek a heavy gold coin.

"What is this?" the youth marvelled.

"A gift to you from Navruz-*pakhlavon*."

His father and the guests began talking, interrupting each other, and Akhmadbek comprehended that the man he had met on the deserted path was none other than the famous wrestler Navruz.

It seems that upon entering the village, Navruz had gone to the farm headquarters and asked that Akhmadbek be sent for. The messenger returned with the tidings that Akhmadbek had taken his lame horse to the vet's in the Upper village. On learning this, Navruz had gone to Akhmadbek's father's house and presenting him with the gold coin had said: "Pray for your son. I met him on the road. He will become a mighty *pakhlavon*."

A year later Navruz went to war and was killed soon after. The coin which he had given as a keepsake to Akhmadbek was, according to knowledgeable people, made of pure gold and the intricate inscription on it was in the ancient Kashmir dialect.

After her husband left for the front, for two years Akhmadbek's wife kept the coin in memory of a good man. But when the Pioneer and Komsomol members of the village organised a collection of wool, leather, warm clothing and footwear as part of the war effort, she donated the coin

with the words: "Let my master come home alive and well, that is more precious to me than any gold."

Neither that day nor afterwards did Akhmadbek talk about his wrestling match with Navruz-*pakhlavon*. Whenever he remembered the incident, he blushed for the fact that he had concealed his name and unintentionally deceived a man who was respected and older in years. Navruz himself made the story public and he invariably ended his tale with the words: "Neither one of us was pinned to the ground, but I acknowledge the young Akhmadbek the victor. As God is my witness, he showed respect to me as a guest and a way-farer."

Subsequently, people began to add various inventions to the story, to embroider it, to alter it, until a true happening was transformed into legend.

7

The evening breeze brought the fragrance of mint to the threshing ground and the gurgling of the Vanch. The voice of only one singer now carried from the yard where the *tuii* was taking place. Apparently, the others had gone home, and the last one, who had had to take his turn with others before, now felt himself the master of the situation and was showing off for all he was worth.

Akhmadbek-*pakhlavon* continued to sit, leaning back against the trunk of the elm tree, when he heard footsteps. Someone was coming along the path leading from the village, furiously cutting with a switch at the tall grass growing beside the irrigation ditch.

Although the moon stood high over the mountains, from a distance it was hard to recognise who it was.

Peering intently, Akhmadbek saw that it was Mukhammadmurad. An unpleasant sensation gnawed at the pit of his stomach.

Well, he thought, both the time and the place are quite suitable. The lad, of course, is seeking me out. What should I do? Accept the challenge? But is he worthy of honest combat? Just what is to be done?

Mukhammadmurad eyed the thick shadow under the elm and asked:

"Akhmadbek-*aka*, is that you?"

Akhmadbek did not reply. He was still preoccupied with his thoughts. Apparently it had been ordained that he was to contend with this swollen-headed youth, teach him a lesson, prove that he was still the former Akhmadbek and take Mukhammadmurad down a peg. But no, still and all, he should not wrestle with him... What was the answer?

"Akhmadbek-*aka*, to tell the truth, we ... we are dust at your feet," mumbled the half-drunk Mukhammadmurad, standing in front of Akhmadbek, "no more than dust at your feet... But I thought that seeing you did not enter the ring with me at the district matches and refused at the *tuii* today, that meant you did not wish to wrestle with me in public, so maybe you will agree to here? Or am I wrong, Akhmadbek-*aka*, please forgive me... We are dust at your feet, forgive me..."

Saying all this, Mukhammadmurad kept untying and retying his belt-cloth.

Suddenly it dawned on Akhmadbek. How was it that he had not recalled it earlier! Some twenty, twenty-five years ago, when certain rascals who imagined themselves *pakhlavons* tried to make him fight with them, he used to get rid of them this way.

"All right, all right," Akhmadbek said. "There's no use going on and on about it. I have long guessed what's bothering you..."

"Do excuse me, *aka*," Mukhammadmurad interrupted him, but Akhmadbek would not allow him to continue his mumbling.

"Listen, I'm ready to wrestle with you, seeing that you have come here for the purpose. But I have one condition..."

"A thousand conditions, from the bottom of my soul, I will fulfil all..."

"For a start, fulfil one."

"With the greatest of pleasure. Name it! Anything! "

"Raise me from my place."

"You? From your place? Right away..."

Mukhammadmurad stepped forward. Akhmadbek extended his right hand to him and pressed hard with his back against the trunk of the elm, while digging his heels into a small knoll. "Oh, patron of all *pakhlavons*," he prayed, "do not allow me to know disgrace... Support me..." In difficult moments he always addressed some mysterious saint who, it seemed to him, was his benefactor and helper in everything.

Mukhammadmurad pulled him by the hand. But Akhmadbek did not even twitch.

"But you're not getting up!" the fellow said incredulously.

"So raise me!"

Mukhammadmurad planted his feet wide apart, squeezed Akhmadbek's wrist with one hand, seized his shoulder with the other, and pulled with all his might. Akhmadbek's shoulder gave slightly forward, but that was all. He continued to sit.

This trial of strength was not easy for Akhmadbek himself. When Mukhammadmurad yanked at him for the second time, it seemed to him that the canopy of the spreading elm swayed and floated aside and red and black dots began to dance crazily in front of his eyes.

Failing for the second time, Mukhammadmurad began to shriek in a rage:

"It's a trick! It's dishonest! What if I sit?! You try and shift me from my place, then I'll acknowledge..."

Akhmadbek smiled scornfully and rose to his feet. Awakened by the noise, the watchman headed towards them, calling:

"Who's there? What's going on?"

"Nazar-bobo, it's me," the *pakhlavon* soothed the old man, and bending over Mukhammadmurad who had taken his place, said: "Dig in your feet firmly."

Mukhammadmurad settled himself, coughed, and only then extended his hand to Akhmadbek.

Recalling Mukhammadmurad's antics in the street that day, Akhmadbek gripped him hard by the fingers and deliberately slowly, without jerking, pulled him towards himself and set Mukhammadmurad on his feet.

"Akhmadbek?! And who is this? What are you doing here?" the old man queried anxiously, approaching them.

Mukhammadmurad, apparently, had completely sobered up.

"Once more, *aka*, I beg you," he said, and a note of entreaty crept into his voice.

For the second time Akhmadbek wrenched the youth from the ground, like a sack of straw, yanked him with such force that the latter stumbled a few steps forward. Mukhammadmurad was breathing harshly in his seething rage.

"Oh, may you break your neck, you scoundrel," the old

man rounded on Mukhammadmurad, having recognised him in the moonlight. "How dare you, apostate, raise your hand against Akhmadbek?! May the bones of your ancestors be damned! May the devils dance on your grave, accursed one! "

What happened next, struck the old man dumb.

"No! " Mukhammadmurad yelled at the top of his voice.

For a timeless instant his shout drowned out all the sounds of the valley, and bouncing back from the mountain cliffs on the other side of the Vanch, shouted again, "You're going to fight me properly! "

Leaping at Akhmadbek, he lunged at his cloth-belt, but Akhmadbek skilfully moved in and grabbed Mukhammadmurad's belt with both hands, dropped to one knee, as weight-lifters do when attempting the last and heaviest weight, lifted the young *pakhlavon* and twirled him overhead.

Without ceasing to twirl him, Akhmadbek walked towards the threshing floor. Mukhammadmurad was helplessly waving his arms and legs in the air, like a child with whom his father is playing. The old man was standing rooted to the spot, his mouth wide open. At last, striking his staff against the ground, he exclaimed:

"Good for you, Akhmadbek! May you never know cares! You have served the wretch his just deserts! "

Having come up to the mound of straw, Akhmadbek flung Mukhammadmurad into it...

Trudging back to the elm, Akhmadbek kept glancing from side to side in astonishment, as though seeking something. It seemed to him that several people were whistling loudly nearby. He halted, pressed his palms tightly against his ears, and only then realised that the whistling was inside his head, just like twenty-four years ago when he had been concussed by the explosion of a long-range shell.

Akhmadbek grew worried that for no good reason his past affliction would return to him. However, gradually his heart began to beat more evenly, the roaring and ringing in his ears began to diminish, and at last had vanished completely.

"Here, drink some cold tea," Nazar-bobo handed him a kettle black with soot.

Akhmadbek took a few sips and glanced in the direction of the threshing ground.

"Where is he?"

"Went down, shaking the straw off like a dog. Even though he is the grandson of my brother, I thank you, Akhmadbek. You really taught him a good lesson. Oh, that skulking jackal," and turning towards the river the old man let loose a stream of epithets. Knocking his staff on the ground, he departed.

Akhmadbek walked the length and breadth of the threshing ground, wishing to take his leave of the old man, but couldn't find him anywhere. "Never mind, I'll see him in the morning," he said to himself, and meditatively set off for the village. After walking about a hundred steps he suddenly swerved and went down towards the river.

The old man was standing on a slope under a tree.

"Where is he?" Akhmadbek asked.

"Over there, see."

Mukhammadmurad was sitting on a rock beside the bank of the Vanch.

"He's weeping, the jackal, may he break his neck! " the old man raged. "The misbegotten creature! "

In the light of the moon it could be clearly seen that Mukhammadmurad had taken off his shirt and was starting to undress. Akhmadbek said farewell to the old man and headed for home. He'll have a swim and cool off, he thought. They say the waters of the Vanch are healing...

The disc of the moon reached the centre of the sky. The last crickets fell silent. The moonlight flooded over the whole valley and the river murmured softly.



THE INTERSECTION



He took several steps and stopped involuntarily. The main dining room of the restaurant was packed. On the semi-circular bandstand at the far end of the room stood a tall young guitarist swaying affectedly, his dark, wavy hair shining under the bright light of chande-

liers, his fingers flying recklessly over the strings of the colorful instrument. The musician winked at the sax player next to him, and the latter puffed up his full cheeks to begin his riff.

Jamshed took it all in at a glance: the layers of cigarette smoke hanging above the tables, the trembling crystals of the chandeliers, the swaying shoulders of the guitar player, the dancing couples, intertwined, and the strangely solitary, slightly out-of-place back of the piano player in the corner. He had the rounded shoulders of an old man who made his music thoughtfully and whose reflections were evident in every melancholy chord.

"Don't block the entrance, young man! I've told you I don't know how many times that all the tables are full!" the irritated voice of the hostess, an elderly woman in an absurd green headdress brought him back to reality.

The number ended, and the tall guitar player sat down, carefully resting his instrument on his knee; the merry, noisy dancers returned to their tables; the pianist stooped even lower over the key board and brushed back a shock of chestnut hair with his delicate fingers.

Jamshed turned to leave, but suddenly he spotted a small table by the window not far from the bandstand. There were two empty seats after all.

"There are two free chairs over there," he told the woman, who had not left his side.

The woman waved her hand in displeasure and resignation and stalked off, muttering something under her breath.

Jamshed made his way through the carefree couples, approached the table and paused indecisively. A man in an expensive, coffee-colored suit was sitting opposite a woman; he leaned close to his plate, pushing the food onto the fork with his knife and greedily shovelling it down his gullet. The top button of his white shirt was undone, and the knot of his tie pushed to one side. The woman was staring indifferently out the window. A bottle of pop stood untouched beside her empty glass, and two red roses blazed in a porcelain vase in the center of the table.

Jamshed put his hand on the back of one of the empty chairs and asked the man, "Excuse me, is this place occupied?"

The man raised his head, still chewing, looked up at Jamshed, and swallowed hurriedly. His shiny face lit up in recognition:

"My, my, what a surprise, Jamshed, old pal. How nice to see you! How are you doing these days?"

Jamshed looked away in confusion. This was not what he had expected at all. His eyes flashed dark, and his heart pounded. No, no! Anything but this! This was the last thing he needed! He clenched his teeth and tried to get a hold of himself. He greeted the man politely, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not force himself to look at the woman.

"Please have a seat; do sit down! " Jalil said, pulling out the chair for him. "Let us have a look at you. How nice it is we've finally run into each other after all these years! When we go back home, I'll be sure to tell your father I've seen you! "

Stunned by the unexpected and totally undesirable meeting, Jamshed sat down. He didn't want Jalil to think he held any grudges. "I'll sit with them for a few minutes and then go," he decided.

"Excuse me, I didn't recognize you..."

"Don't worry about it! I didn't notice that it was you at first, either," Jalil said with a smile, his gold teeth gleaming. "But since our hearts are pure and our intentions noble, fate herself has led us to this little table."

Jalil called the waitress over, whispered something in her ear, and turned back to Jamshed:

"So tell me how you're doing! How are the wife and kids?"

"Fine, thank you, we're all doing well. Why don't you tell me about yourselves instead..."

"We just drove out here to relax. As they say, 'A rest is relaxing, and a little jaunt is the most relaxing of all.' We have our own car now—nothing luxurious, of course—so it's just a hop, skip, and a jump for us to zip out here." He fell silent for a moment, pursed his lips and looked at the woman. "But this time, we're not having much fun..."

"Why, what's the matter?" inquired Jamshed politely, trying with all his might not to show how distraught he was.

"Shakhnoz is not feeling well. It seems the climate here doesn't agree with her," replied Jalil, pursing his lips again. Then he added, as if he had only just remembered: "But, of course, you know each other, don't you? You went to school together, as I recall..."

...Yes, Jalil, we went to school together. We were even in the same class. You know it perfectly well, so why are you being such a hypocrite? Or do you think I didn't recognize you that night? Well, if that's what you think, you're mistaken! I remember everything clear as a bell. I remember the dark, foggy street and the lone streetlamp in the distance, the turned-up collar of your coat, and the wide-brimmed hat that covered even your eyebrows, and your weak chin, hidden behind a scarf.

"Yes, we went to school together," replied Jamshed.

"And now you're working at the newspaper, or so I've heard..."

"Yes, that's right."

"You journalists probably do all right for yourselves."

"We make enough to get by on."

"That's good... I heard it through the grapevine that your father-in-law is well-placed. With his support, you can go far. By the way, is he the one who helped you get such a good job at the paper?"

Jamshed started, but he kept his cool. Finally he got up the nerve to look at the woman beside him. Shakhnoz, who was staring out the window, slowly turned her head, but did not return his glance. She knitted her brows, and her lips trembled: was she ashamed of her husband's crassness?

Jamshed did not take his gaze off her, and it seemed to him that not a spark of the fire that once burned in her almond-shaped eyes remained. There was some vague new shadow in them Jamshed could not quite put a finger on—an odd mixture of indifference, unconcern, and regret...

"But her beauty has not faded," he thought. "She's filled out a bit, but no more. I wonder if she has guessed that I still remember her after all these years?"

Eight years before, when they had just graduated from high school, Shakhnoz had given him a copy of Voinich's novel, *The Gadfly*, bound in green leather for his birthday. She had smiled mysteriously and said:

"In the whole world, there are only two people that I care anything at all for. One of them is the hero of this book..."

"And who is the other?" asked Jamshed with a sinking heart.

"The other one?" Shakhnoz continued, averting her gaze. "I don't know him yet..."

"I don't believe you! "

"Why not?" inquired Shakhnoz, raising her marvelous eyes to Jamshed, as he felt the blood rush to his face against his will. Her eyes glowed with pleasure. "Do you think ... that ... you know who the other person is?"

"No, I have no idea! " he replied, his heart skipping a beat.

"The other is the heroine of the tale..."

...Goodness, how long ago that was! And I've kept your gift all these years, Shakhnoz. For it is the only memento of my first love and all my unrealized dreams...

Jalil took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and asked:

"Could I offer you a cigarette?"

"I don't smoke, thank you."

"Good for you."

...That whole last year of school, no one had any doubts that we were head over heels in love. We sat next to each other and almost never left the room during recess: we could not bear to be parted even for a moment! Sometimes, we would study together in the evenings, and we would go to the movies in our free time... All the while, we had no idea our classmates were calling us Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Leila and Medjnun... How blissfully the

days went by that last year... After we graduated, Shakhnoz began taking correspondence courses at the teacher's college, and I went to work on the railroad. We had a big family, and every extra kopeck was worth its weight in gold. I wanted to work for a couple of years to help my father out, save up some money, and then go to college. I had dreams of becoming a journalist...

"Good for you," repeated Jalil. "I know every cigarette I smoke is another nail in my coffin, but I've been smoking for twelve years now, and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to kick the habit," he proclaimed and stopped talking long enough to take a cigarette from the pack and light up. "And how many children do you have?"

"We've got one daughter..."

"How nice..."

...Every evening, when you got off work, I'd be waiting for you by the kindergarten gate. I knew every scratch in that gaily painted wicket gate by heart, even though I never had to wait long. You'd appear in the twinkling of an eye, hurrying toward me as if the expectation of our meeting had hung heavy over you all day. If I close my eyes, I can still see you, just as you were then. I really believed then that you had spent the whole day just waiting for me. "I saw you standing here through the window," you would say with a tender smile. Every day I swore that that very evening I would ask you to marry me, and every evening you managed to change the subject... Do you remember? The days passed, and the months, until one day you finally said yes. It was cold and snowy, but I didn't feel my legs under me. I flew home as if I had wings! Remember, we decided we would marry that summer, as soon as your exams were over...

And do you remember the next thing you told me: "Don't come to walk me home any more. People are starting to talk." I was shocked, but blinded by the joyful thought that you had finally consented to be my wife: "So let them. We're getting married soon anyway!" And do you remember how you bit your lip, jerked your hand away, and ran off? The sky fell on me that day, for up till then, I had only read in books how painful love can be. From then on, you had no more use for me or my love. I saw you several times after that, and every time, you were walking with that worthless Jalil. He had just graduated

from the economics institute and had been named the director of a big department store.

Do you remember all that?

"We have three boys," said Jalil, blowing smoke from the corner of his mouth. "The eldest is already five."

The waitress brought three plates of chicken Georgian-style, a bottle of cognac, three bars of chocolate, some cheese and a pitcher of lemonade, all of which she arranged on the table before us.

Jalil tapped the ashes into the ash tray and took charge with obvious relief: he poured two glasses of cognac, broke the chocolate into little pieces and arranged them on a plate...

"Shakhnoz, you won't have anything to drink, I assume..." he addressed his wife without looking at her or awaiting a reply, then continued, still facing Jamshed: "We've known each other all these years, and this is the first time we've ever sat down to have a meal together. Old friends should stick together, Jamshed. So let's drink that we might meet again in the near future."

Jamshed looked at Shakhnoz out of the corner of his eye. Her face was motionless as a Greek mask, and she continued to stare pensively out the window, but under the table, her nervous, tense fingers crumpled her napkin with unexpected malice.

"Well, if that's something we have to make a toast to, then bottoms up," assented Jamshed. He suddenly relaxed, and Shakhnoz felt his change of mood immediately. She glanced at him quickly, and he thought: "Their glances intertwined, as the saying goes." And so it was...

"Let's drink then," said Jalil, extending the other's glass. When he had taken it, Jalil announced: "It's your turn, pal! "

"My turn for what?" inquired Jamshed, breaking into a smile.

"Well, you're the eloquent journalist among us, aren't you?"

...Soon there were rumors that Shakhnoz was engaged to Jalil. I couldn't sleep nights: as soon as I closed my eyes, your face would appear. You would whisper something to me, but I couldn't make out what. So I would wander the streets aimlessly until sunrise. No matter how hard I tried, I could never understand what I had done to offend you or

why you had shattered our happiness to bits with your own hands.

One day, I could stand it no longer. My feet took me to the gate of the familiar kindergarten of their own accord, as if drawn by some mysterious force. I didn't have to wait long that day either, only about ten minutes. You glanced coldly in my direction from the door, curtly returned my greeting, and hurried off in the other direction. I went running after you and asked:

"Shakhnoz, is it true?"

"Is what true?" you asked over your shoulder without stopping.

"What people are saying."

"Yes, it's true."

"But don't you know what kind of person he is?"

"Why? Do you think there's something wrong with him?"

"That's not for me to decide, but I..."

"What about you? At least he's not the kind of person who would hold a girl's hand and then tell everyone he had been with her..."

"What do you mean by that, Shakhnoz?! "

"Don't you know?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking! "

"A fine one you are! It's a shame I didn't find out what a dishonest, envious person you are long ago! "

Yes, that's what you said. I stopped dead in my tracks from shock, stunned by the base slander I had just heard. I never found out what foul person had spread such lies about me, but even now I am outraged and wounded by the injustice of it. That was the last time I saw you, and even now we haven't a word to say to each other. Why do you turn away, Shakhnoz? What are you thinking about?"

Jalil softly touched Jamshed's shoulder and asked with a chuckle:

"What are you ruminating about, old pal? Has the cat got your tongue, or what?"

It seemed to Jamshed that the other's inquiry and laughter had a triumphal ring to them and no little irony.

"I was ill the day of your wedding and never got the chance to congratulate you. It may seem funny after so many years have passed, but today I would like to drink to your health and happiness."

"Thank you, Jamshed, old pal. And to your happiness as

well." They drank. The quartet on the bandstand started up a whimsical melody, which mingled with the shuffling of the dancers into yet another tune consisting not just of sounds but of the mood of everyone present. The song was whimsical and at the same time rakishly carefree, despairing and sad, even mournful...

"How about another, Jamshed?"

"Thank you, that's about all I can handle."

"Don't be so squeamish! It's barely a jigger-full..."

"I still have some work to finish up this evening..."

"Have a little more! Your work can wait!" Jalil set the shot glass down in front of Jamshed, turned to Shakhnoz, and added: "Your food is cold."

But Shakhnoz, pale and silent, simply raised her head and glanced querulously at her husband as if she had not even heard him.

"Your food is cold, I said," Jalil repeated patiently and indulgently. "You really should try to eat a little, even if you don't feel well." Shakhnoz continued to stare indifferently at him, but she raised her fork and picked obediently at her chicken, then lowered her head again.

Jalil struck the match several times before it finally caught, lit a cigarette, and took a long drag...

...After our talk that day, Shakhnoz, I went to the restaurant at the railway station and drank vodka for the first time in my life. At the time, I thought that was what a real man would do—drown his grief in wine. When I finally left the place, my head was spinning, and my legs were unsteady: I barely made it back to my street in one piece. I had just crossed the irrigation ditch that runs along the road when I heard someone shout "Stop!" through the darkness on the other side. The voice was hoarse and unfamiliar, but I stopped anyway. I leaned against a tree trunk to keep from falling. Someone came up to me, grabbed me by the collar, started to shake me, and said: "So the little wimp has gone and got his feelings hurt... My, my, how sad!"

The anger welled up inside me, but I kept calm, for I wanted to find out who my assailant was. But I couldn't tell: his raised coat collar, wide-brimmed hat, and scarf hid his face completely. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"It's none of your business who I am, but if I catch you talking with Shakhnoz one more time, I'll chop your head

off and throw it to the dogs. First you go running your mouth, and then you try to hide! ”

“I’ll see whoever I want, and it’s no one’s business but mine! ”

“You think so?”

“Yes! ”

“Then remember this, you little wimp: my friend’s honor is more important to me than anything on earth! If you dare to see Shakhnoz alone ever again, I’ll cut your throat!”

The blood rushed to my head, I pushed myself away from the tree, and shouted angrily at the stranger:

“You can go and tell your friend Jalil that if he were a real man, he wouldn’t let someone else do his talking for him! If he’s got anything to say to me, he knows where I live! ”

The rest of the incident was like a dream.

The stranger shouted: “So it’s Jalil you want?! Here, take this! ” I didn’t manage to duck, and the powerful blow to my face almost knocked me from my feet. Feeling the blood gush from my smashed nose and split lip, I reeled forward, aiming my fist at the hidden face of my offender, but I missed and came away with only the end of his scarf in my hand. Whether from the blow or from anger, I sobered up right away and recognized the stranger. With the scarf pulled back and the hat askew, it would have been impossible not to recognize him!

Forgetting the pain, my swollen lip, and my throbbing nose, I burst out laughing:

“What a roach you are! ”

He bent over, covering his face with his hand, and aimed at my groin with all his might. But I jumped back, so he only got my left knee, but again, the blow was so heavy, it almost knocked me to the ground. Pain, anger, and offense cleared my head and gave me the strength to act. I balled up my fist, ready not only to deflect the next blow but... I wouldn’t have let him get away alive...

The next thing I heard was the sound of someone running away. Sometimes I wonder why he ran away. Perhaps he was afraid I would recognize him and tell everyone of his dastardly deed. After all, we had been neighbors for years—how could I help but recognize him? Or maybe he didn’t want to ruin things between us entirely—but what kind of relationship could we possibly have after all that had hap-

pened? In any case, that was neither the first nor the last time he did something base...

"What did you say?" asked Jalil in surprise.

Jamshed and Shakhnoz looked at him.

"Nothing," replied Jamshed, shrugging his shoulders, not realizing that he had begun to mumble aloud.

"I thought I heard you say 'old' or 'told'..."

"Ah-h-h," proffered Jamshed with a tight-lipped smile.

"I said, 'Your supper is already cold.' "

"You look as if you don't feel well, old pal. Is anything the matter?"

"No, everything is fine. I've just been feeling a bit lonely the last few days. I'm at home alone for a while."

"Did you and your wife have a quarrel?" inquired Jalil with obvious interest. "Has she been gone long?"

"Nothing of the kind! " Jamshed said with a laugh. "My mother came over, and took her and my daughter for a brief visit. One of our relatives is getting married."

"Oh, so that's what happened. And I thought..."

...I saw you two days later on my way home from work, Jalil. My knee was still sore, and I walked with a slight limp. You were standing by the gate of your house eating pistachios, and wearing a fine green robe of silk blend and an expensive deer-skin cap. "How did you hurt your leg, Jamshed? Whatever happened?" you asked innocently. I laughed, looked you straight in the eye, and said: "Some dumb son-of-a-bitch jumped me in the middle of the night. Too bad I never found out who it was! "

"What a bastard! Have you reported it to the police? We seem to have more than our share of hoodlums these days."

Jalil proceeded to expound on this subject at great length, taking great pains to avoid my gaze. It was all I could do to keep from beating him to a bloody pulp in a righteous attempt to rid the earth of such scum...

One night, some five years later, I realized that I had been wrong to keep my peace. I should have shouted my tale of woe up and down the street to expose that treacherous villain. I should have beaten the dickens out of him instead of suffering silently... But I was no better at that sort of thing then than I am now, for there I was sitting at the table with him.

"I heard you came to visit your father last winter. It's a shame you didn't stop by."

"There really wasn't enough time. We were only in town for two days."

"I hope we'll be seeing each other more often now. Remember, Jamshed, you are always welcome at our house. Drop by any time. A person is like a pearl of great value, after all. And for as genuine a human being as you, I would do anything."

Jalil pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and loudly blew his nose. Shakhnoz started, raised her lovely eyes to her husband, and lowered her head again. "Her indifference is but a form of collaboration with her husband," Jamshed thought suddenly, surprised by the unexpectedness of this thought. "Passive participation..."

"Not long ago, fortune smiled on me again, and I got a better job. So now I'm in a position where I can always help my friends," said Jalil, then fell silent in expectation of some query, and finally continued: "You have to know whose back to scratch to get ahead these days! "

"For as long as I've known you, you've always managed to succeed at whatever you tried your hand at."

"That's because my intentions are pure! "

The men ceased talking.

Supper had long grown cold. The glasses of cognac stood neglected near the edge of the table. Jalil continued to smoke, and Shakhnoz did not break her silence. Jamshed was getting more and more depressed. The general festive mood of the restaurant passed him by. He regretted that he had come and that he was carrying on such a pointless conversation. It occurred to him that their chance meeting was more like a funeral repast...

"Excuse me, but I really have to go now..."

"What do you mean? It's still early. We have the whole evening before us! "

"I still have a lot of work to do tonight."

"Well, if it really can't wait, then at least have another drink before you go! "

"Thank you, but I really can't."

"What kind of a man are you? One tiny glassful never hurt anybody! " "

"I'm sorry, but I really can't. I wasn't planning to spend the whole evening. I just came to eat supper, actually."

"It's a shame to waste good brandy."

Jamshed glanced at Shakhnoz. She had not said a single

word the whole painful evening. At some points, it had seemed to Jamshed that she was crying, that remorse had filled her dark soulful eyes. And then she reminded him of a wounded partridge shrinking before the feet of the hunter. Then her face would change imperceptibly, and he would find himself sitting next to a cold, unfamiliar, calculating woman who would be transformed in an instant into a confused young girl... But who was Shakhnoz, really? "Why do you want to know?" Jamshed rebuked himself. "What's done is done; the past is dead... A strange woman is sitting next to you, not the girl you loved. Why reopen old wounds? Get up and leave. Can't you see she's suffering. Do you want to get pleasure from someone else's pain? What makes you think she's suffering anyway? Maybe she just doesn't feel well..."

"I won't try to make you stay. I know myself what urgent business can be like. I run up against the same problem once in a while in the evenings," Jalil said in a soft, insinuating tone. "As soon as we get back, I'll pass on greetings from you to your father, and we'll be glad to see you the next time you get to town. And your wife is more than welcome, too. We'll sit and have a nice long chat." Jalil raised his hand, caught the eye of the waitress, who was sitting behind a painted column, and gestured for her to come over.

The waitress came over with her pad and pencil in her hand. She asked Jalil:

"What can I do for you?"

"Could we have the check, please? We're leaving..."

"It's still early. You can sit a while longer if you want," protested Jamshed.

Jalil glanced at his watch, then added: "Right you are; I thought it was much later."

"Twenty three roubles, seventy eight kopecks," announced the waitress, putting the check down on the table.

"We've changed our minds, miss. We'll stay a while and dance a bit. So the other gentleman is the only one who is leaving. Come back later, and we'll take care of the bill then."

As the woman was about to walk away, Jamshed stopped her, took a twenty-five rouble note from his pocket, and handed it to her.

"They are my guests; I'll take care of everything," he

said, rising and looking first at Jalil, then at Shakhnoz. "Well, take care of yourself! "

"Don't offend us, Jamshed, old pal! That's no good! It's not as if I couldn't pay myself! "

"Don't be offended, Jalil, old pal," replied Jamshed, deliberately repeating Jalil's favorite phrase. "Next time, you can treat."

"That's another matter, then. More befitting a man."

The waitress held out his change.

"Keep it..."

"Good-bye, then," repeated Jamshed, glancing at Shakhnoz.

"I hope, Jamshed, old pal," began Jalil, rising from the table, "that even though we live far from each other, our hearts will be united from this day forth! We were neighbors once, after all! And neighbors are closer than brothers. They say that even in the next life, on Judgement Day, we will all have to account for our sins and our good deeds will be weighed in our favor. So, if it be the will of Allah, we shall meet again."

"Of course."

Jamshed looked at Jalil once more and then at Shakhnoz, picked up the glass of brandy from the table, and drank it with unexpected pleasure, gazing into the bottomless eyes of the woman across from him. Deep within them a tiny spark flared up, then went out again. But it might just have been the reflection of the glass: the light from the chandelier shining on the upturned bottom. The light...

"Good-bye, then."

Jalil shouted something after him in a tone of admiration, but Jamshed didn't hear what it was. On the small bandstand in the corner of the main dining room, something changed imperceptibly. The tall young guitar player stopped clowning; the sax man stepped to the side, and the elderly pianist straightened up. He reached up with slender sensitive fingers, ruffled his chestnut mane like an unseen wind, and...

Jamshed's face turned cold as the smoke-filled hall, the noise, and the clinking of knives and forks were drowned out by the compelling melody of the famous Ogynsky polonaise.

Jamshed looked about, but he could see neither Shakhnoz nor Jalil: their table was concealed by the painted column. A balding drunk was clinging to one of the columns

crying plaintively, his head drooped. The tears had reached his wrinkled chin and were dripping to the floor...

...Several days went by.

Jamshed was returning home from work. A lilac twilight had already fallen over the city, and it was raining. A fine, warm rain that had been falling since morning, washing away the grime of winter—the trash, last year's fallen leaves, filthy rags—and returning everything to its original fragrance and color: the houses, fences, the bushes with their swelling buds, and the first blades of grass.

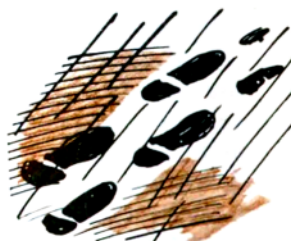
Jamshed stopped at an intersection to wait for the cars to pass. Through the misty rain he saw a black Volga stopped at the crossing, and behind the wheel was Jalil smoking a cigarette with Shakhnoz sitting next to him. Both were staring indifferently ahead in utter estrangement. The drops of rain tapped against the glass to be brushed off by the windshield wipers, and just as quickly, the faces of the people sitting inside the car were brushed away. It seemed that they would be erased completely after a few more sweeps. But they themselves would not notice their facelessness: they would simply drive on, visageless individuals...

The light changed, and the cars pulled off. Jamshed leaned over to look after them, but at that moment, an old man tapped him on the elbow and asked:

"Could you tell me if there is a tea room nearby, sonny?"

"There's one just around the corner."

While Jamshed was explaining to the old man how to get there, the car passed, and he didn't even see which way it went. Only the rainy evening remained.



PULAT TOLIS

PICKING TULIPS



If you have ever been in Leninabad, then you know that the Syr Darya River lies to the north of the city, and beyond that is a rocky steppe which extends all the way to the foothill of the Mogol Mountain. The mountain is not a high one. It has no glaciers, rivers with cas-

cading waterfalls, or peaceful groves. In the spring, its slopes are covered with tender grass against which colorful patches of flowers stand out. Once they start to bloom, the locals hike to the Mogol to pick snowdrops, and later, tulips and bitter-sweet rhubarb, of which there is a great deal. Young boys are the most frequent visitors to these slopes.

I remember when I was a boy, quite early in April, my friend Yusuf and I decided to go to the Mogol to gather tulips. We spent all day getting ready, and the next morning, started out well before dawn.

We filled a bottle with river water as we crossed the bridge and set out across the steppe. It was chilly, and the wind that blew was so strong it made me shiver. "When the sun comes up, we'll be warmer," Yusuf, who was on the plump side, tried to encourage me, for he was quite unaffected by the cold. He even unbuttoned his collar.

I involuntarily envied his plumpness and patted his stomach:

"A fine one you are to talk with such a gut! "

"Well, in this case, it's better than being a broomstick like you! " he replied, giving me a push with his shoulder.

We started to tussle.

"Well, have you warmed up yet?" he inquired when we settled down, wiping the sweat from his brow.

I had, of course, but soon I was cold again. The wind cut me to the marrow, and though it had grown light long ago,

the sun had not yet appeared from behind the mountain. We gazed apprehensively up at the cloudy sky, wondering whether we should go back. At that time, I was eleven, and Yusuf was twelve.

"We could go back, of course, Hashim, but it would be a disgrace," Yusuf observed soberly. "All the other boys will laugh at us."

"What rotten weather! " was all I replied.

"It's been fine up until today... Just our luck it turns bad! Maybe it will clear up in a while."

"Come what may," I announced with a flourish, "Let's get moving! After all, a little rain's hardly a wolf that can eat us alive."

"Maybe we ought to go back..."

"You certainly are the brave one! " I said sarcastically. "We made a deal, after all..."

"O.K. If you insist..."

The grass that covered the steppe rippled in the wind. Here and there, a poppy bent its head low to the ground. The fragrance of the fresh grass and the wild flowers rose from the earth. Occasionally, a grasshopper would fly up from under our feet, and sometimes a lizard would run past and disappear at once. The lizard's coloring made it almost impossible to distinguish from its surroundings.

"Look, Hashim! " Yusuf burst out unexpectedly, stopping dead in his tracks. At his feet lay the bloody feathers, claws, and head of a bird.

"The poor thing! .. I bet a fox or a wolf got it..."

"It was a partridge," Yusuf concluded with great certainty. "And there aren't any wolves around here."

We continued in silence. The fate of the unfortunate partridge distressed us greatly.

"In nature, a merciless struggle for survival goes on constantly," intoned Yusuf all at once, mimicking our teacher.

I burst out laughing, and chattering merrily, we continued on our way.

Soon we reached the foothill and began to climb upward. We left the steppe behind. The wind made the carpet of grass sway like the waves of the sea, and it seemed to us as broad and endless as the ocean—something we had seen only in the movies.

We ascended until we reached the gorge. There was no wind, and the birds were chirping all around us. Once in a

while, we heard the apprehensive beating of partridge wings. Here the grass was thicker and came up to our knees. Our feet were wet with dew. The bright green verdure of the slopes—not dusty like in the city—drew us like a magnet. The air here was entirely different—clean and fresh. It was easy to breathe, and we were so captivated by the natural beauty all around us that we forgot all our fears.

But our joy did not last for long. All of a sudden, a dog appeared from nowhere growling quite maliciously. The dog's eyes were wild and bloodshot, and its coat stood on end. If not for the clipped ears, it could easily have been mistaken for a wolf.

I glanced at Yusuf who was pale as a ghost and staring with wide eyes at the approaching monster.

"Maybe we should throw a rock at it," I whispered.

Yusuf shook his head. "What are you, crazy?! If you make a move, that beast will tear us to pieces. So just stand still and stare straight into its eyes."

"Let's run, Yusuf! We'd better get out of here on the double! "

He grabbed my hand tight.

"Don't move a muscle, you idiot. Listen to what I'm telling you! "

I don't know whether Yusuf was right or not, but sure enough, the dog stopped a few feet away from us and began to bark as if it were calling someone. Its coat lay flat, and the barking was not as vicious as at first. I calmed down a bit, took a piece of bread from my pocket, and held it out to our canine captor.

"Here, take this! "

But at that, the dog again began to snarl, jumped back, and started to bark even louder. My knees grew weak, and I trembled with fear.

"Don't move, you dummy! Did you think I was talking to that tree over there, or what?" whispered Yusuf hotly.

So we stood stock still for what seemed like ages, but still the dog did not stop barking.

"Karo, sit! " a shout rang out.

A tall man appeared from behind a ledge in the rock. The dog fell silent at once and ran up to him, wagging its tale.

The man leaned upon a shepherd's crook and had a rifle hung at his back. He was wearing a Kirghiz hat trimmed in fox. His long black robe, girded with a wide army officer's

belt, hung all the way to the ground. The collar of an army field shirt poked out from the top of the robe. The stranger's face was tanned from exposure to the elements. His narrow, almond-shaped eyes glared at us suspiciously.

"What do you want here?" he asked us in Tajik, but with a thick accent that told us immediately he was from somewhere else.

We stared at him in confusion, not knowing what to answer.

"I asked you what you wanted here! " the shepherd repeated gruffly. "What did you come here for?"

"What does he think, that the whole mountain belongs to him?" I thought angrily to myself, then suddenly answered roughly in a moment of boldness:

"We came to gather tulips."

"To gather tulips..." he drawled. "Still wet behind the ears and already crawling all over the mountain like a couple of goats! If something should happen to you, you'll get your tulips then! .. Come on, Karo! " he called to the dog and walked off, muttering something under his breath.

"What a prickly one, that," said Yusuf after a long pause, mopping his sweaty brow. "Not a bit like a Tajik..."

"Must be a Kirghiz," I replied, then asked at once: "I wonder if all the people from Kirghizia are as mean as him?"

"It takes all kinds to make a world," responded Yusuf with an air of importance. He never doubted his superiority: he was sure he was smarter than me and knew a great deal more. "Some people from Kirghizia stayed with my aunt for a while, and they were fine people. Not a bit like that character."

We continued on our way. Yusuf had only gone a couple of steps when he burst out laughing.

"That dog of his sure did give us a scare, didn't he?"

Soon we came to a big gorge on the other side of which was a white felt tent—yurta—common in Central Asia. Nearby grazed a small flock of sheep. A column of smoke rose from the fire by the tent, and not far away stood a small boy in a dark shirt turning the handle of a barrel-like apparatus.

"He's churning butter," explained Yusuf, although I could see for myself.

In the middle of the flock, a man in a black robe was bending over one of the sheep, feeling its belly.

"It's him."

"Yeah, let's get out of here, Yusuf."

So we decided to go around the gorge to avoid further contact with the shepherd and his nasty dog. The path we were following narrowed as the mountain grew steeper and steeper. Views each more beautiful than the previous one opened before our eager eyes. We were glad of heart, and although we had already come a long way, we did not feel tired in the least. No bird's song or beating of wings broke the absolute silence except the dull thud of the stones we knocked down the path as we tramped along.

"Look, there's one! A tulip!" Yusuf shouted suddenly and ran toward it.

Yusuf always noticed everything before I did! And this time was no exception: he had the honor of picking the first tulip. I watched with envy as the red bloom disappeared into my friend's sack. But then I saw another blotch of red in the distance and raced toward it with a triumphant yell. As I picked the tulip, I caught sight of a whole field of red and yellow tulips ahead—hundreds of them covering an entire slope!

Hurriedly picking the lovely flowers, we did not notice that we had reached the crest of the mountain and had begun to descend the slope on the other side.

"Well, that's enough for me," Yusuf said at long last. "I can't stuff even one more tulip into my sack."

"So shall we go back now?" I asked, noticing that my own sack was quite heavy.

"Well what do you think? What else do we have to do here? Only let's eat first. Look, there's a spring over there!"

A clear spring bubbled up under a gnarled mountain fir. So we soaked our pita bread in the icy water and ate heartily. When I was sated, I said that the spot where we were sitting would be a nice place to build a house. As always, Yusuf objected. He explained that it would be boring to live there all alone, and that anyway, there weren't any stores or bazaars. So how would we get along?

Time passed unnoticed as we continued our lively argument. Suddenly, the wind rose, and the sky filled with menacing thunderheads. Yusuf jumped up hurriedly.

"Soon it's going to pour!" he yelled.

I was filled with terror, for there was nowhere to take shelter from the torrential rains that were common that

time of year, and it would be dangerous to try to descend the narrow path below us in a downpour: we would surely slip and fall into the gorge below. Anything might happen, so we quickly gathered our things and raced down the slope. The sky was growing darker by the minute, and the wind was rising and buffeting our backs.

It grew quite cold, and lightning flashed directly above us. At once we heard the deafening peals of thunder. The earth rumbled beneath our feet. The wind began to whistle and howl about us as if spurred on by the thunder and lightning. It drove us downward. I fell and almost went plummeting into the gorge below.

"Yu-su-u-f! " I yelled out in terror, but the wind carried my cry away unheard.

At that very moment, a large drop of water splashed on my forehead: the rain had started.

Soon it was pouring, and in a few seconds, we were wet to the bone. The grass was flattened to the ground, and it was dreadfully slippery. When the lightning flashed, we noticed a hanging ledge under which we could take shelter, so we ran for it. But still, it did not protect us from the torrent. Water poured through the cracks in the stones and splashed on us in heavy streams that threatened to wash us down into the yawning gorge. A deafening crash was heard: several enormous rocks had been dislodged and were plummeting into the gulf below. They rolled by uncomfortably close to our shelter. We were seized with terror.

"If only we can hang on! If only we don't slip! " I repeated again and again like my grandfather repeated his prayers.

The rain kept coming. I don't know how much time passed, but still we clung there, shaking and numb with cold. My fingers were cramped with exhaustion, and we had lost all hope of salvation when suddenly, through the noise of the downpour, I heard someone's voice. At first I thought that my ears were playing tricks on me, but then the shout rang out again. And after that came the barking of a dog. How that sound gladdened us!

"Yusuf, Yusuf, do you hear that?! " I exclaimed joyfully.

"Here we are! Yoo-hoo! Here we are! ..." Yusuf shouted.

And then, through a shroud of rain, we saw an enormous dog. It ran toward us barking fiercely, but this time we weren't afraid in the least. It could bite us as hard as it

wanted, for now we were saved! The shepherd appeared from behind the cliff. He had thrown a tarpaulin mantle over his robe, but he still had the shepherd's crook we had seen him with earlier. The dog ran back and forth between us, wagging his tail furiously to show his joy. And a smart, kind dog he was! Without saying a word, the shepherd took out a flask, poured a clear liquid into the cap, and gave each of us a bit to drink. Something bitter seared my mouth and throat, but soon I felt warm all over. It gave me fresh strength. Only after that did the shepherd say:

"Follow me! "

In the twinkling of an eye, we were inside the yurta where we found a brazier glowing merrily with live red coals.

"Dry yourselves out by the fire! " he said and left without another word. We spread out our clothes to dry them, and then, the boy we had seen churning butter that morning came in.

"So you got caught in the rain, did you?" he asked with mirth in his eyes. "I bet you got a good scare! "

"No, not a bit," replied Yusuf, his face flushed. "What was there to be afraid of?"

"Good lads! It surely frightened my uncle and me! "

"What did you have to worry about?" I asked in disbelief.

"You've never been up here before, and you have no idea what might have happened to you in a storm like this. Don't you hear the rocks crashing down the mountainside out there? You could have been caught in a rock slide sure as I'm sitting here! "

And when we listened, we realized it wasn't just thunder making all the noise. There were tiny avalanches on all sides.

"What are your names?" asked the boy, so we told him.

"And my name is Mirtemur. Make yourselves comfortable."

He spread out a cloth and put out pita bread and cheese, then set out a bowl of boiled meat and one of sour milk. We fairly threw ourselves at the victuals.

That evening when the rain had stopped, Mirtemur, his uncle, and their trusty dog walked us all the way to the edge of the steppe. The shepherd shook our hands as if we were grown men.

"Have a nice walk back," he said quietly.

"Thank you very much for everything! " we exclaimed

and set off across the broad steppe.

After we had gone some distance, we turned back to look. The shepherd was still standing there, leaning on his crook, gazing after us. In the deepening twilight, he looked like a giant to us. Mirtemur waved. Karo was sitting obediently at his side.

“Good-bye! ” I shouted.

“Good-bye! ” I heard Mirtemur’s reply, muffled by the distance.

Waving in farewell, we continued on our way. And although we knew there would be the devil to pay when we got home, our hearts were light.

Only when I became an adult did I realize the reason for our joy that day: I realized that the greatest possible happiness comes from meeting a truly good person.



A WIND FROM HOME

1



The moon hid behind the swift-flying clouds of spring, peeking out to illuminate the vast green steppe from time to time. Then the flames of the campfires to the south would dim, and the silhouettes of tents with banners fly-

ing overhead would appear in the silvery moonlight only to fade from sight once more as the moon ducked behind a cloud. Then, as if by magic, the fires would blaze up again.

Two horsemen waited motionless above the deep irrigation canal. They faced north, but turned now and again to gaze at the sleeping camp behind them. From the far-off villages to the west, cocks' crows and the barking of dogs could be heard occasionally.

Their bay horses grew tired of standing still and stamped the ground, impatiently tugging at their bridles, lavishly decorated with chased silver, urging their riders to move on.

The reflection of the moon played on the dark, glassy surface of the irrigation ditch which stretched out into the distance and disappeared behind a stand of poplars. A stone flew up from one of the horses' hooves and plopped into the ditch, cutting the moon in half. The shattered pieces of the mirror-like surface carried the halves away on rippled waves, but soon they were back together again. And once more the silver ship of the moon with swift clouds for sails was reflected in the dark water. Caught up in the play of light on the water, the horsemen failed to notice the ominous storm clouds blowing in from the west to hide the luminary of the night which showed its face less frequently now.

The darkness grew thicker, and thunderclouds covered the sky. Cold gusts of wind with tiny drops of rain struck their faces.

One of the riders dismounted, laid his spear in the grass,

and without letting go of the reins, tightened the girths of the saddle.

"Look, Safar! " his companion exclaimed, not taking his eyes from the flames of the campfires. "At night our camp is like a vast cemetery with a candle burning on every grave."

But apparently, Safar didn't catch what the other said, for he silently took up his spear and remounted.

"It's time we were getting back. Everything is quiet. Let's go! "

And without waiting for a response, he turned his horse around and headed back for camp. His companion soon caught up with him, and they trotted side by side. Glancing at Safar's gloomy face, his partner said:

"You haven't smiled for days. Has anything happened? Are you trying to keep something from me?"

"No, nothing's wrong," snapped Safar, and continued gloomily on his way.

Suddenly his horse shied near a pile of stones and pricked up its ears. A gopher raced across the road a few paces ahead, and two fire flies circled under the horses' heads. Safar's mount grew calm, neighed loudly, then continued on its way. As if waking from a deep sleep, Safar said:

"For the last month, I've thought of nothing but my poor old mother day and night. You know yourself, Abbas, that when I left, she couldn't get up from her bed. I haven't heard a word from her in all these seven months, and I have no idea how she's doing. The last few days I've had the feeling I'll never see her again. When we left, I promised her we'd only be gone about two months."

"Yes, we're all sick to death of this campaign. Even the ones who convinced the emir to come here regret their actions. Now they don't know how to get him to go back to Bukhara."

Safar stared silently at the fires by the tents. An owl flew overhead and let out a piercing shriek.

"See, there's even a hoot owl. A bad omen to be sure! I've been overwhelmed by ill omens lately—I'm quaking in my boots from the lot of it! "

"So are we all supposed to go around being superstitious as a gaggle of old women now, or what?"

"No, Abbas, it's not just that. Misfortune awaits us. I can feel it in my bones! Three nights ago, I had a nightmare, and I'm still not completely myself. I dreamt that I was

riding watch alone far from the camp. I came to a very wide river and stopped to look at the churning waters. I noticed something moving on the other shore, looked more closely, and saw that it was my mother. She was lying prone on the sand and raised her head to stare intently at me. Her gray hair fell in a tangle over her dark, pained face, and she stretched out her feeble arms and called out to me, but I could barely hear her voice. I was powerless to move. An enormous snake slithered to the right of her—if I were a moment too long in coming, the viper would bite her. So I spurred my horse on and plunged into the river. But the water was at flood tide, and my mount was caught in a whirlpool which sapped the last of his strength. But I could see only my mother through it all. When I reached the middle of the river, I heard a terrifying roar, and the current almost swept me away. My eyes were blinded by a flash of light, and a mighty hand plucked me from the horse's back and tossed me onto the bank from which I set out. I began to scream, opened my eyes, and saw the roof of the tent above me and Abulfazl by my side. The poor man had gotten up to see what was wrong and was staring at me in concern and amazement. And outside, there was a thunder-storm.

“ ‘Why are you shouting?’ he asked.

“ ‘I was having a nightmare! ’ I told him and turned over on my other side.

“After that, I couldn't fall asleep for a long time. Every time I closed my eyes, either the snake appeared, or my mother started to call me. Just now when the stone fell into the ditch, I could see the roaring river of my dream and the blinding light, and it seemed to me that my poor mother was on the other shore...”

Safar lapsed into silence. The howling of a jackal could be heard in the distance. Lightning flashed in the west, illuminating the low-hanging storm clouds.

From the left where the village was came the cries of a hoot owl, muffled by the distance. This one reminded Safar of the other hoot owl which had flown overhead. This second screech seemed a sure omen that misfortune would not be long in coming. He could imagine the piercing eyes of an owl before him, so he winced, scowled, and lowered his head.

Abbas was also alarmed by his friend's tale. The myste-

rious sounds of the night pressed on his heart, and he tried to find some more comforting interpretation of Safar's nightmare so he could ease his friend's troubled mind, but his thoughts grew confused, and not a word of encouragement would come to him. He coughed uneasily.

"It's Satan trying to turn your head. Take heart, my friend, and you'll see that everything will be alright! "

But Safar did not answer. They were already near the camp, and here and there, peoples' shadows were visible near the fires. Three soldiers sat by the fire before a tent that had seen better days. Two others, covered with a rough wool blanket, were sleeping with their backs to the fire.

When they heard the clatter of the horses' hooves, they woke with a start and turned to face the approaching riders, not taking their eyes off them until they galloped up to the fire.

"Why aren't you asleep yet?" inquired Abbas, who tethered his horse and walked over to sit down beside them. "Give our old nags some hay, Safar, then come rest your weary bones a while."

He threw an armful of kindling wood on the fire and blew on the flames, wiping the tears from his smoke-filled eyes with the cuff of his sleeve. The tongues of flame rose ever higher from the blue puffs of smoke and reflected crimson on the pale, tired faces of the sleepless warriors. Safar's cheeks flushed, but he was still worried and uneasy. He sat sideways and stared dully at the fire, stirring the glowing coals with a long stick.

"If you get rested up before your watch, you'll never tire before morning," said Abbas, pointing at the sleeping figures with a smile. "Yakub, have you seen Mansur today? How was he feeling?" he asked the man next to him.

"Sure," replied the other with a sigh. "He seemed better, but he's nothing but skin and bones and won't even look at anyone, poor fellow."

"Losing his brother Ilyas was a great blow to him. You don't find many soldiers as fine as that one," Safar responded quietly so the others wouldn't hear.

"It was as if Ilyas was looking to die. Do you remember the day we saddled up our horses to play *chavgan*? Mansur and I begged him not to play, because he wasn't well yet. But he wouldn't listen. The emir's word was law, after all."

Safar considered Ilyas' untimely and unexpected death

during the mounted games an ominous sign: he had fallen dead from his mount. He was terrified that he might meet his end just as uselessly: on the campaign or out hunting without ever seeing his mother again. It was not the unexpectedness and unpredictability of death that frightened him but the thought of how it would grieve his ailing mother, she would not be able to bear his death. So Safar added nothing more to the conversation but rather tried to chase all gloomy thoughts away. He looked over at his mount, still chewing its hay, and pushed a smouldering ember back into the fire.

"Rudaki the poet is coming," said Yakub.

They all felt their spirits surge, and Safar's depressing ruminations were dispelled at once.

The figure of a short man appeared from the darkness some twenty paces away. Abbas jumped up and crossed his hands on his chest in a gesture of greeting. The rest rose as Rudaki approached with his head lowered. He stopped a few paces from the fire and glanced in the direction of the soldiers. A faint smile could be seen on his lips through the uncertain light of the campfire.

"*Assyalamu aleikum*, o poet," the warriors greeted him in unison.

"*Va aleikum oos selyam!* " replied Rudaki. "Keeping the peace for us, I see..."

"Yes, sir, your Excellency," came the barely audible reply from a soldier by the name of Abulais. The others lowered their heads in respectful assent.

"A thousand thanks and great praise. To keep the peace is truly a noble endeavor. May Allah the Most High be with you! "

Rudaki righted his cloak and, without waiting for a response, went to his tent. The standing soldiers looked after him. They could see his stooped back as he slowly increased the distance between them until he disappeared into the darkness.

"It seems our poet is out of spirits—he left so quickly," decided Yakub, the first to resume his place by the fire. "Do you remember how he used to sit with us until far into the night joking, reciting his poetry and singing... This isn't the first time I've seen him wandering alone among the tents at night. Whenever he sees me, he asks briefly how I'm feeling then heads quietly for his tent as if his mind were somewhere else."

"He may just be working on a new poem," proffered Abulais. "The light stays on in his tent till morning every night."

"Yesterday, his assistant Yakhya recited one of his poems for me," announced Safar, and a smile flitted across his lips. "He said it was a verse Rudaki composed during the emir's trip to Sarakhs dedicated to the beauty of Bukhara. When I heard the poem with its stringed *tar* accompaniment, I immediately forgot all the adversities and misfortunes of the last few days. I asked him to let me make a copy of it so I could enjoy the beauty of the words." Safar took a scrap of paper from his robe and read by the light of the fire, glancing down at the words:

*A breeze from Bukhara has blown here
Filled with the fragrance of jasmine, sweet basil, and mint.*

*Some say: "This breeze is from Khotan, for there,
Meadows have more flowers than a speckled robe."*

*But no, this intoxicating breeze is surely from Bukhara,
The city where my beloved treads upon the grass.*

Silently, I breathe your name once more.

I dare not say it aloud for fear the rumors will fly.

*Yet, despite all my fears, it escapes my lips unbidden,
Though I know the price of such indiscretion to be quite high.*

While Safar was reading, Abbas did not take his eyes off him, enjoying the excitement of the other's sensitive soul, reflected so openly on his face. And for his part, Safar, not suspecting that in addition to Abbas, all the rest were listening attentively, stared out into the foggy night. As he finished the last couplet, he turned to his friend.

"It's a nice poem," said Abbas. "I heard it a long time ago and even knew some of it by heart."

"Our poet loves Bukhara a great deal," piped up Yakub. "He feels like a bird without a nest when he stays away for too long. Many of his verses are dedicated to our city..."

"Yakub, it's time the fellows set out on their rounds," Abulais interrupted him. "Let's send them off and we'll sleep for a while. Abulkhafs! Murad! Time to get up! "

The two men sleeping by the fire arose, mounted silently, and headed south. Abbas stretched, covered himself with a blanket of rough cotton and shut his eyes. The rest followed his example and lay down on the tender young grass.

They all fell asleep, but Safar stared at the dark sky that hung low over them like a cellar ceiling. He was exhausted from depression and insomnia. An incoherent picture of the past, alarming thoughts of the future, and his friends' words flashed through his mind so rapidly that he could not focus on any one thing. If he closed his eyes for a second, he was beset by the roaring river, the distant figure of his mother, and the repulsive gleam of the snake's scales. He opened his eyes and turned to his other side with a sigh.

Finally, he was overcome by exhaustion and fell asleep. Now neither the mysterious rustle of the steppe that night, nor the cries of the birds or even the rumble of thunder in the distance could wake him. He slept like a babe in its mother's arms, calmed by her life-giving warmth.

2

Every morning after breakfast, Rudaki sat down to read. For the second day, he was poring over a tract by an obscure Greek scholar. In places, the translator had misinterpreted the text, and it seemed that the Greek had foreseen the rise of Islam, which seemed highly unlikely. Although the author believed in the power of the Almighty, he considered matter the fundamental substance of the universe. He thought fire had brought all that was living and non-living into motion. He used logic and examples to support his position. Rudaki left the real world behind to wander about the realm of thought, penetrating its most secret places as he carefully turned the fragile pages of the old manuscript.

Occasionally, he would take up his reed-pen to note down the conclusions and postulates that pleased him most.

The hours flew by, and Rudaki continued reading, totally engrossed. Surprising as it may seem, he did not even notice when three high-ranking and respected dignitaries from the emir's court entered his tent.

Their greeting jolted the poet back to reality. He stood up to return their greetings and invited his unexpected guests to make themselves at home.

"I am honored by your presence. My humble shelter is filled with rays of joy," he said politely, crossing his hands on his chest. Then he quickly gathered up the papers and

manuscripts and put them into a beautifully carved wooden chest.

The unexpected appearance of these three noblemen who were so close to the emir himself surprised him. What did they want? True, Abujafar, who managed the emir's estate, and Muhammad Salekh, his trusted confidant, occasionally dropped by, but this was the first time Takhir Balkhi, commander of the army, had ever come. Rudaki had only seen him at the emir's feasts. What could possibly have brought such a man to the tent of a poet?

"You leave your quarters so rarely these days," began Muhammad Salekh as soon as Rudaki had sat down. "Allah preserved us, you have not fallen ill, perchance?"

"No, I am quite well, thank you. But the gloomy skies and the endless rains depress me. I feel more like staying here and reading than going out on such days."

Muhammad Salekh glanced at Takhir Balkhi as if appealing for support. But the officer had bowed his head and was staring through big brown eyes at the harp hanging on the peg. So to keep the conversation going, Abujafar said:

"You're quite right, dear poet; on such days, none of us feels like leaving his tent."

"And we've been away from our wives and children so long, we're all bored to tears and more than a little homesick," added Muhammad Salekh.

"Could it be that our sovereign has no intention of returning to Bukhara in the near future?" inquired Rudaki.

"We have tried time and again to bring the subject up, but the emir takes no notice of our words. He simply praises the gardens and delectable fruits of Bogdis and extols the meadows of Herat."

Rudaki turned to the military commander and asked:

"Surely there is something our honored hadji can do to convince the emir to return to Bukhara..."

"I asked the emir about this in private, but all he did was knit his brows and raise his goblet in place of an answer, indicating that I should drain my glass along with him."

"It seems our ruler likes the climate here," inserted Abujafar.

"But the weather in Bukhara is not inferior to this, especially in spring. Surely the beauty of the River Mulien is as great and the air near the river bank just as pure!" remarked Rudaki in surprise.

"Right you are," said Muhammad Salekh wistfully. "How nice it would be to spend the spring in Bukhara with our wives and children and then escape the heat of the summer in Samarkand. It would save us all a lot of trouble if only the emir would give his consent..."

Rudaki silently cast a glance at Takhir Balkhi, wondering what he would say. But he just sat with his head down.

"Honored poet," began Muhammad Salekh afresh, "we, your humble servants, have come to you with a request and believe that you will justify the hopes we place in you." And catching an encouraging glance from Rudaki, he continued more boldly: "We have decided to bring up the subject of Bukhara at the next feast the emir holds to try to convince His Highness it is high time he returned home. But our plain speech might not have the desired effect, while we are sure that your eloquence and verses are certain to move him. Perhaps you can help us find a way out of our dilemma."

"I doubt very seriously that verses have more of an effect on the emir than the words and convictions of worthy and respected gentlemen of the court," Rudaki remarked sternly.

"Most worthy poet, we know your verses well and value them, and we are equally aware of the esteem in which the emir holds you. Every word that falls from your lips has a definite effect on our sovereign," confirmed the commander.

"If you decide to take this step, master," broke in Muhammad Salekh, "you will release many others besides us from their sufferings—even our pitiful slaves will be better off if we go home."

Then he noticed that the poet was staring at his low sandalwood desk, and the pensive expression on the bard's face confused him. Suddenly, he felt helpless as a child. And in fact, there they were—three highly placed officials of the Samanid emir's court—sitting in the humble tent of a poet begging for help like a bunch of strays without kith or kin. And really, their arguments were so naive that to object would be to show one's own stupidity—something Rudaki surely knew better than they did. These thoughts made Muhammad Salekh nervous, and then Abujafar had to go breaking in with his totally inappropriate insinuations. The emir's confidant burned with shame when he heard how Abujafar prattled on:

"And as far as remuneration, you need not concern your-

self. We are prepared to pay gold and silver twice over the amount the emir himself would grant for the service we require."

And with this, Abujafar glanced in the direction of Takhir Balkhi.

Rudaki glared at Abujafar and spoke with an ironic smile:

"My dear sir, no words measured in precious stones or verses composed for silver and gold can possibly have the effect you desire. It is not heaps of gold but reminiscences of Bukhara, the native city so dear to my heart, that can give me the strength to pull verses from the depths of my soul which will touch the hearts of others."

No one replied, for the poet's irony confused the noblemen. But they took his words for a hopeful sign and beamed at him.

"We are grateful to you, o poet most worthy," Muhammad Salekh murmured at last. "Those of us from Bukhara, and particularly our vizir, the most honored Balami, will be grateful for any assistance you might find it in your heart to render us."

Rudaki made no reply, but attempted to change the theme to improve his mood so he would not offend one of his guests with some rash remark after their inappropriate suggestions. But the conversation flagged, for his guests did not want to cause him any unnecessary concern: they had achieved their goal and needed no more from him. And so Rudaki, who realized that his sharp tongue and bitter irony might have offended these mighty men, showed them respectfully out of the tent.

When they had gone, he sat before his desk and resumed his study of the philosophical tract which had been so much to his liking in a vain attempt to forget what had happened.

* * *

The rays of the sun poured through the cracks in the ceiling of the cupola, falling on the felt mat and blankets, lighting up the tent like candles in a candelabrum suspended from above. Outside, slaves could be heard as they ran about, pleased with the good weather which had appeared after days on end of nothing but rain. Rudaki watched the reflection of a sunbeam slowly make its way to the edge of his desk.

The unexpected visit of the three noblemen and their short conversation had upset his equilibrium. He glanced at the book lying on the cover of the carved chest which he had been reading before their visit. But now the Greek philosopher's complex interpretation of the creation and evolution of the world seemed empty and pointless. His thoughts were occupied by the request of men involuntarily torn away from their homes and families, men burdened by this separation and deprived of the joys of life.

He stretched out on his couch above a low desk and, recalling the face of the commander who had sat before him the previous day with a downcast face like a naughty boy being scolded, he smiled. Was that not the haughty noble who had urged the emir to travel to Herat seven months before and to take not two hundred slaves but four hundred... And now his longing for his wives and children had driven him to the tent of the court poet.

Homesickness overcame him and made him sad. He remembered his native village and the road to Samarkand. His mind was filled with the sweet thought of the days he had spent in Bukhara. These reminiscences gave him such pleasure that he involuntarily closed his eyes so nothing would interrupt this vision of the past. What mysterious force was calling him home? He had no wife or children, so that wasn't the problem. It was just that he suddenly became intensely aware of his solitude, not only in this small tent and in the camp, but he realized he was alone in all the world...

He could see the tiny village of his birth embraced by the tall white-capped mountains and the green grass over which he had run barefooted as a boy and then a teenager. There were the crystal clear springs that had quenched his thirst, but not the flame that burned bright in his youthful heart. He heard again the shepherds pipes and the three-stringed *tars*, the laughter and prancing about of the barefooted boys along the village streets. Then the quiet of moonlight evenings and the tales of his friends and brothers. He laughed at their jokes and enjoyed their merry songs. All this swept past him as quickly as a swift mountain stream.

He recalled the road that ran from Panjrud to Samarkand, and then farther, all the way to Bukhara. Had he not doomed himself to solitude, then? No, for he loved Bukhara as much as his native village; it was there that his dreams had

been realized: he had gotten an education and begun to write poetry. It was in Bukhara that he had spent the sweet years of his youth. In Bukhara, he had found friends after his own heart and interlocutors who, like himself, had overcome many difficulties along the road to the capital on their way from distant parts. They proudly wrote poems and books in their once-humble native tongue, Dari. He found new sources of strength among his friends there and felt that he would be forever young.

But on his extended journeys about the fine regions of the Samanides state* and at the emir's feasts, he felt lonely.

When he recalled how the noblemen had talked about their wives and children he gave a crooked smile. "If, like me, they had no families, they would probably dispense with their governmental duties altogether! I doubt they would ever return to Bukhara!" Memories and inexpressible pain drove him from his desk. He jumped up and began to pace about the tent. His throat grew tight and his breathing labored as if all the air in the tent were poisoned.

So the poet rushed to the doorway and stood there drained of all strength. Breathing deeply and screwing up his darkened eyes in the bright sunlight, he looked about. In the distance towered the great tent of the Emir Nasr. There was no one about except the two guards by the entrance. The blue and white banners hung lifeless in the still air. Without taking his eyes off them, Rudaki thought it entirely possible that Nasr's father had been killed in just such a tent a little more than two decades earlier. It was said he had come home drunk one night and ordered the guards and two trained lions away from the doorway. He didn't see why he needed to take such precautions, for his power was unlimited and firm enough to surmount all obstacles. The next morning he was found murdered. To that day, the old men talked of the presumptuous carelessness of the great emir. Rudaki always listened to the legends of the emir's death in silence, but thought to himself that the great emir's power certainly wouldn't last long if it rested solely upon the

* The Samanides State (875-999) was a feudal government founded on the territory of present-day Central Asia. Its capital was Bukhara. The dynasty of the Samanides ceased to exist after Bukhara was captured by the Turks in 999. It took its name from Saman-Khudat from the village of Saman.

strength of guards and trained lions. Surely there was some less tenuous means of preserving one's power and one's very life!

The poet thought with horror that if not that day then the next, the son might meet the same fate as his father. Then what would happen? Could it be that the bloody battles and selflessness of the people which had allowed the Samanides to come to power and given rise to the splendid buildings and magnificent palaces, to the gathering of the finest scholars and thinkers of the day in Bukhara, carrying the fame of the Samanides state and its capital to the very center of the caliphate had all come into being just so that on that day, far from the seat of power and from the affairs and business of governing, the emir might wake from an untroubled sleep in his great tent and continue to amuse himself?

Rudaki went back inside. He had neither the energy to read nor the inspiration to write poetry. He sent his assistant, who had appeared at the appointed hour away until the following day.

Towards evening, as twilight was falling over the steppe, Rudaki donned a clean robe, put on his turban, took up his staff, and went out. Life in the camp was in full swing. The slaves were bustling about preparing the evening meal, scraping the sweat from the horses' coats and grooming them, cleaning their masters' garments, and conversing by the fire. Rudaki stood for a while and observed their incessant motion as they went about their daily tasks. Then he set off for a quieter place. Leaning forward slightly as he walked with the aid of the staff he maneuvered his powerful frame past the torn, raggy tents that were the slaves' quarters and past their campfires, responding to their greetings with a nod of his head. He could think of nothing but how to get to the steppe as fast as possible so he could be utterly alone, far from the sound of human voices and the constant buzz of the great camp.

As he made his way past the commander's tent, he recalled the confusion on the man's pleading face and quickened his step to avoid meeting him by chance.

He had barely reached the steppe when he heard the plaintive sound of a flute coming from one of the tents. He stopped to listen, entranced by the captivating melody. He peered in the direction from which the lovely sound was

coming, for he wanted to see the flute player. But then he turned back around, deciding to listen till the very end of the tune without missing a note. Gradually, the song grew softer until it finally ceased altogether. But still, the poet did not move, for it seemed to him the music had not ended. At last, he realized the flute had finished some time ago, so he continued walking, humming the haunting melody he had just heard.

The moon lavished its silver light on the broad steppe. The groves of trees scattered here and there reminded him of the dark tents of the nomads. Either the haunting melody of the flute or the mysterious beauty of the steppe had cheered Rudaki infinitely. Like a thunderhead blown away by the wind, the ominous anguish that had beset him during the day dissipated.

The outline of the fortress at Herat appeared in the distance with the guards' lanterns twinkling like pale stars just before morning. A huge torch blazed above the Khush gates. Herat and its environs were well known to the poet. Legions of traders who spoke in many tongues gathered before the great gates on bazaar days. He would go up and down the rows in search of rare examples of Hindu and Kashmir handicrafts, and sometimes he would even manage to find fine writing paper or a valuable manuscript. When there was no bazaar, the area was quiet. North of the fortress, the glassy Indjil River sparkled in the moonlight. One of its branches flowed right through the city itself. Beyond the river stood the splendid houses of the rich landowners, surrounded by verdant orchards. Several days before, Rudaki had been a guest at one of them as part of the emir's retinue.

The poet sat down on a boulder beside a large lake that had formed during the recent floods and stared at the fortress. He thought of Bukhara's Arg and the lush orchards all around it. The water of the Muliien sparkled exactly the same way in the moonlight, flowing unhurriedly past banks wrought skilfully by human hands, its majestic, glassy surface reflecting the orchards and palaces. Occasionally, Rudaki would recite poetry to his friends on the river bank or hold verse competitions there. And sometimes, he would compose ballads under the willows in the quiet of the evening... He could see it all in his mind with crystal clarity.

Again he recalled his first days in Bukhara. After the

mountain orchards of his native village, the man-made parks and gardens of the capital seemed strange to him. The unkempt splendor of nature seemed oddly absent from them. It was a long time before he grew accustomed to the uniform canals, straight as an arrow, and the dull sameness of the streets. The wild rivers and high peaks of his native land drew him irresistibly homeward. But little by little, the quiet and calm of the gardens laid out along the Mulien and its pure water that gave cool and repose in the heat of the day won Rudaki over. Strolling along the peaceful river banks, he could not get enough of the beauty created by human hands and the strength of reason in this oasis in the midst of the dry desert sands.

Now he was alone, far from Bukhara and the gentle breezes of the Mulien, far from his dear friends. Again homesickness took hold of him. He wished only to be in his beloved city with his true friends. He could see each of them in his mind and held a silent conversation with them all.

Rudaki peered up at the dark cloudless sky, sighed, and whispered:

"Splashing and sparkling, the Mulien calls me home. She whom I love calls me home."

The words flowed from him so unexpectedly that he did not even notice their melodiousness or meter. But still, he repeated them softly once more. The homesickness for Bukhara and the longing for his friends that had been with him all day seized his whole being, and the lines to a new poem flowed from the depths of his soul one after the other. They were majestic as the Arg—the fortress of Bukhara—and melodious as the song of the flute he had heard on his way out of the camp. Pure, calm, and fresh as the crystal clear water of the Mulien. Fervent and moving as a meeting with old friends. Fragrant as the breath of a lover. The verses came of their own accord, taking possession of his every waking thought, but still, somewhere deep within him was the idea: "Maybe these are the rhymes that will move the emir to return home." He sat motionless for a long time, filled with the quiet and spaciousness of the steppe, at one with nature, pouring the riotous joy that seized his soul into the flaming verses that poured unbidden from his subconscious and would not be subdued by his reason.

The damp weather had a bad effect on the weak, sickly Emir Nasr. He had a bad cough and was troubled by chills and fever, so he sat despondent in his tent for days on end. Solitude and illness made him petulant and irritable. His servants ran their legs off and the members of the court were in despair. But two days earlier, the clouds had dissipated, and the people close to the ruler had noticed signs of merriment upon his face. He even began to treat his servants more kindly.

That morning, he summoned his advisor Muhammad Salekh and quietly shared a meal with him. All evidence of the recent ill-temperors had vanished without a trace. When his confidant rose and asked permission to leave, backing respectfully toward the door of the tent, the emir stopped him. His majesty desired that his friends and companions gather at the royal tent that very evening to entertain him. The ruler was particularly insistent that Rudaki be present.

Muhammad Salekh quickly informed Abujafar of the emir's orders. Consulting one another continuously, they began to prepare for the feast. Muhammad Salekh set off to invite Rudaki personally. When he saw the pensive, serious expression on the poet's face, he decided not to repeat the request with which he had come to the man a few days before.

"If he refuses again, it will only ruin my festive mood. It would be better just to wait until this evening and see what happens."

There were not many people at the emir's feast: in addition to his close advisers, there were only Rudaki and his assistant and two musicians—a flute player and a fellow with a stringed *tanbur*. Rudaki sat in the place of honor next to Muhammad Salekh. Accompanying himself on the harp, he sang the lovely rhymed couplets known as *ghazals* and listened to the musicians. Nasr drank wine continuously, and despite the kind insistence of Abujafar, he merely picked at the exceedingly palatable delicacies placed before him. Nor did the commander of the garrison lag behind his royal highness in consumption of strong drink. When the music ended, Muhammad Salekh and Abujafar tried their best to amuse the emir with jokes and anecdotes. Occasionally, even Rudaki joined in the conversation with an amusing

parable or a recitation of some profound couplet. In response, Nasr would smile kindly at him, roll his drunken eyes, and exclaim:

“Bravo, Rudaki! Bravo! ”

The disjointed conversation dragged on and on. Rudaki was bored to distraction. When the *tanbur* player struck up a tune, he noticed that the emir's eyes had filled with tears.

He glanced quickly at the harp standing next to his assistant and recalled the verses that had come to him in the steppe the evening before. He looked over at Muhammad Salekh and saw that the latter was following the mournful melody of the *tanbur*, head lowered, brows knit into a frown. The final notes of the melody had not yet died out when Rudaki rose, crossed his hands on his chest, and announced in a resonant voice:

“Your Majesty, no matter where we, the humble servants of your vast and mighty state, may be, our hearts are always in Bukhara, the seat of your government and site of your ancestors' magnificent mausoleums. These facts make Bukhara sacred to every one of us. Several days ago, I composed an ode dedicated to this marvelous city which is so dear to all our hearts. It is a reminiscence of the dear friends of our hearts who impatiently await the return of their beloved ruler. With your permission, Your Highness, I will sing several verses.”

Muhammad Salekh jerked and started from his somnolence. Abujafar and Takhir Balkhi trained eyes bright with unshed tears upon the poet. Nasr slowly raised his head, his reddened eyes also brimming, his sorrowful glance a plea for sympathy.

“Go ahead,” he said barely audibly.

Rudaki took up his harp and tuned it without taking his eyes off the slight, stooped figure of the emir. Then he pressed the harp to his breast and began to play, his gaze turned on the harp pins. Everyone fell quiet: only the breeze against the cupola of the tent continued to rustle. Rudaki lowered his eyelids. The melody he had heard the day before rang out, and in the rich vibrato of his voice there sounded not emotion but a sense of resolution: he had to influence the emir. Rising and falling like the gentle waves of a calm sea, his voice slowly made its way into the hearts of those around him, calling forth a reciprocal tremor.

*Splashing and sparkling, the Mulien calls me home.
She whom I love calls me home.*

The song, trapped for long days and nights in Rudaki's soul, had torn its way to freedom and was soaring beneath the broad expanses of the great tent's cupola. But to Rudaki it seemed that there was not enough room in the whole of the enclosure for his words: the air felt stuffy from the breath of the wine-soaked guests.

He had not sung with such abandon and sweet oblivion for years! The minor chords and melody of his favorite song filled his heart with a strange sense of triumph. Rudaki even forgot about the presence of the emir. His tender words praising the greatness of Bukhara and those who had increased that glory lent his singing solemnity and profound feeling. His glorification of the past rulers of the city served as a covert hint at the nonentity of their descendant, a weak-willed captive of the vine. The tiredness could be heard in Rudaki's voice whenever he hit a high note, for he was far from young. But his supple fingers made the harp sing as irrepressibly as ever.

When Rudaki finally opened his eyes, he looked at the emir who had covered his wine goblet with his palm and, supporting his lowered head with the other hand, was rocking slightly from side to side. Rudaki realized that he was crying. Takhir Balkhi was stupefied, drunk on the wine and the music. Abujafar was staring at the poet with a steady gaze from which it was obvious that he was prepared to fall on his knees before Rudaki, but could not express such profound gratitude in the presence of the emir. Muhammad Salekh sat still as a statue, his eyes on Rudaki, waiting with bated breath for the emir's response.

The poet's assistant understood from his expression that the old man was tired and did not want to continue, for he might ruin the mood he had just created if he did. So the younger man took up the harp and his lovely voice filled the tent before the sounds of his master's song had even died away. The walls reverberated with the captivating melody:

*Make haste to Bukhara, city of happiness, O Great Emir.
She sends you her fond regards and calls us home.
You are the moon, and Bukhara the firmament on high,
And what is lit by the moon's light calls out to us.*

*You are a mighty plane tree, and Bukhara a garden in full bloom.
The rustle of leaves and birdsong call us home.*

The music had barely ended and cries of approval begun to ring out when loud sobbing was heard. Face on his cushion, crying pitifully as a baby, sat the great Emir Nasr. His overturned goblet rolled before him.

Turmoil broke out. Muhammad Salekh motioned for the musicians to leave the tent at once. He stood and tried to right the cushion under his majesty's head.

Nasr pushed his hand away, then raised his head, and motioned for Abujafar to refill his overturned goblet. The latter jumped up and refilled the goblet from a painted pitcher. Then he filled the rest of the goblets. Nasr still sat clutching the goblet in his unsteady hands.

"Bravo, worthy poet! Bravo! " he shouted in a voice hoarse from crying. "You have cheered our wounded heart and given our stiff body strength. You have gladdened the spirits of our ancestors who have been laid to rest in the sacred soil of Bukhara. No doubt, they have grown angry with us for having deserted them. Worthy of great praise, you are, o exalted poet! "

Nasr's voice had begun to tremble. To hide the tears streaming from his eyes, he drained his goblet, then turned to Muhammad Salekh and ordered:

"Tomorrow break camp, and we shall set off for Bukhara! Do you hear? We must return to Bukhara as quickly as possible! " Then he turned to Rudaki and added: "Yes, we must go to Bukhara... We are most grateful to you, o honored poet! We praise your great gift and inspiration. Our guests are free to take their leave, now."

Rudaki stood, bowed low, and left the tent. His chest drew in the fresh air of the steppe, and the captivating melody reverberated in his ears.

Nasr was left alone in the great tent. He stood up and leaned his back against the desk, but his legs would not support him, so he collapsed onto the rug. He tried several times to get to his feet, but he could manage only to turn over on his back. The only spots of color on his pale face were his eyelashes and thin mustache. His faded lips continued to tremble as if even in his dreams he were remembering the angry spirits of his noble ancestors and were thanking the poet Rudaki for his timely warning.

...The sun was not yet up, but the edge of the horizon had turned a faint pink. The purple mantle of dawn played over the grass and the leaves of the trees, covering them with a haze of gold and green. Only the song of the birds in the nearby groves broke the early-morning quiet, and then the muted bells of a long caravan which had set off half an hour before. A brightly painted throne had been affixed to the back of one of the camels in the middle of the caravan. And upon this throne solemnly sat the Emir Nasr in a robe lavishly embroidered in gold thread. Closing his eyes, puffy from drunkenness and long, sleepless nights, the emir dozed, starting awake with a shiver of alarm from time to time. His head was filled with disturbing thoughts which kept chasing sleep away. Would he reach Bukhara healthy and in one piece? Would he make it back to his friends and elegant palaces? Would his thin, sickly body survive the long, arduous journey? Would Bukhara greet him with open arms, as the poet had implied the night before, or would some deadly disaster befall him along the way?

He wanted to chase away these unpleasant thoughts for long enough to enjoy the calming aroma of the steppe, but he could not banish the tormenting fears even for an instant.

Rudaki and his assistant followed somewhere near the end of the long caravan train. He looked straight ahead as if he could see the fulfilment of all his hopes and desires somewhere in the distance. The poet was filled with inexpressible joy. With great pleasure, he felt the warmth of the rising sun on his aging body and listened to the chirping and twittering of the birds all around, heralding the great awakening of nature that took place each spring.



MARUF BOBODJAN

A SHAWL FOR MOTHER



Everything was fine—"O.K.," as the fellows at the garage would say. The road was fine, and his truck was running "O.K.!" Kudrat listened with pleasure as he revved up the 150 hp motor: it sure was guzzling the gas. A hungry little hunk of rubber and steel, but a real beauty!

And it was spring—already spring—a good thing, for this was the season he loved more than any other. You waited all winter for a breath of it, then when you thought it had finally come, you'd get nothing but a thaw and more mud. Then another snowfall before you knew what'd hit you.

The fluffy clouds looked like they'd just come out of the laundry after a good bleaching. And the sky had never been bluer. The willows and grass along the roadside gleamed like new, while the almonds on the hills were in full bloom. They were blooming like mad, but the leaves weren't out yet. But it was chilly still, and the wind smelled of snow. And then too, Kudrat hadn't been able to start the truck's motor right off, there'd been such a nippy frost the night before. There was still a bit of snow in the gorge, but that was alright, because the sun was really beaming down!

Kudrat thought about all this with a bit of exertion and a pain in his heart that he knew wouldn't quit, for it was there every time he thought of his mother. Actually, Kudrat thought about his mother all the time: it was all the rest he had to force himself to ponder on. Even when he managed to distract himself from direct thoughts of her, the dull pain in his heart wouldn't go away.

The day before, his mother hadn't felt too well. "It's nothing to worry about. I've just caught a cold. That's all.

The almonds are blooming, and you know this is the time of year everyone gets sick." But he was sure it was worse than just a cold, for his mother was never one to talk of her illnesses. But even if it was only a common cold, at her age, it was still no laughing matter. She should stay in bed and take care of herself, at least for a couple of days. Auntie Bakhri had promised to take care of her out at the farm, but his mother wasn't one to accept help from others, and it was impossible to convince her to take it easy. All she had said was: "Son, your concern is the best medicine in the world for me... If I keep busy, it will pass sooner..."

So now Kudrat was chewing himself out because he hadn't managed to get her to do what he told her and because he didn't take good enough care of her, and because he was a milksop in general.

Behind a turn in the road there came the unexpected, jarring sound of a siren, so Kudrat hugged the very edge of the road. An ambulance tore by him, its siren still screaming.

"As soon as I get back, I'll take Mother to the doctor's if I have to drag her," Kudrat decided. "At her age, her health is nothing to be sneezed at."

After he had decided what to do about his mother, he felt better. His heart grew light. He rolled over hill after hill, feeling his insides go up and down like a small boy on a swing. Again he began to think of the road ahead, of the mountains and the almond trees. These hills weren't the Pamirs, but there were still some pretty tough curves to negotiate. The pass ahead was 1,245 metres above sea level. He had to spin the steering wheel so hard it almost wrenched his shoulder muscles just to keep the truck on the narrow, winding mountain road.

An old woman flagged Kudrat down in the village near the pass. She was wearing a shabby old plush coat and a white scarf with tassels. The face under the scarf was brown and wrinkled. She reminded him so strongly of his own mother it pained him to see her.

"Good day to you, Grandmother!" said Kudrat with feigned cheerfulness, opening the door to the cabin.

"May you live a hundred years, my son!" she replied with the traditional greeting and reminded him a great deal of his own mother. "You aren't going to Gulistan

by any chance, are you?"

He nodded, got out, and put the old woman's heavy bag on the floorboard in front of the passenger's side. "I'll be ever in your gratitude, my son!" she thanked him with the customary phrase. Kudrat drew his jacket tighter around him: the wind certainly did smell of snow. He unhurriedly circled his truck, kicked the tires with his boot in the usual manner, and noted that they sounded hollow as if grumbling lazily and with great displeasure at being disturbed. But the tires were full and wouldn't need air any time soon.

A group of young people came running from the village toward him waving and shouting something he could not quite make out for the roar of the motor. They were all dressed in shiny orange windbreakers that looked new and identical boots. "Eight in all," counted Kudrat. "Students from Gulistan doing their practicums here," he reasoned.

And he was right, they were all headed for Gulistan... "At three roubles apiece, that'll be twenty-four for the lot of them," he thought with pleasure.

"O.K.!"

"What's that you say?" they inquired.

"I said, 'Climb in the back!'"

Now Kudrat drove more carefully. There were cliffs to the left, and to the right—almost under his wheels—was a gorge. He knew the road, of course, and it was perfectly navigable, especially after they had widened it a few years back. It was as broad as a highway now, and you could even hold races on it. But still, it was better to keep your eyes peeled on the turns: he had no desire to send the ten of them careening into the ravine!

Spring had come to the mountain pass as well. There were more patches of snow here, but next to them rose the tiny yellow heads of the year's first snowdrops. The snow was porous and covered with a thin layer of ice. But he couldn't look at the patches for long so blindingly white they were.

Kudrat remembered how he and the other boys used to bring bunches of snowdrops to the roadside. Those were difficult days, for the war had just ended. And there would be only one or two vehicles that passed their way in a whole day, but they would buy the flowers, and the boys would

spend the money for candy.

"I should get that shawl for my mother," thought Kudrat. He had had his eyes on a scarf for her in Gulistan for a long time. It wasn't as big as a shawl, but it would keep her warm. Somehow, as long as he had been intending to buy it for her, he had never managed to: either he was short on money or he blew every kopeck he had out with the guys. Only once had Kudrat ever given his mother a present: he gave her all of the pay he received for his first month's work as a truck driver. How many roubles had passed through his truck-driving hands since then! But it was always the same old story. Sometimes he thought he would never manage to do anything really nice for his mother—a fine son he was! "I've got twenty-seven roubles," Kudrat figured, "plus some money for dinner and unforeseen circumstances, that should give me just enough for the scarf..."

Kudrat felt much better after he came to that conclusion. The gray larks had not yet flown north for the warm season, and they rose from the warm asphalt before his mighty wheels with cries of irritation at being disturbed. The students in the back were laughing and singing and slapping in time with their tune on the wooden benches that ran along the sides of the bed. But the old woman sat in silence staring through the windshield. Her face was sad, mournful even, and Kudrat couldn't imagine why she should be down in the dumps on such a fine spring day. He leaned toward her on the sharp turns and tried to look out her side of the windshield: maybe she saw something he didn't. But no, there were only patches of old snow and yellow snowdrops, nothing more.

"Are you going visiting, Grandmother?" he inquired at last, unable to stand the silence any longer.

"I'm going to see my son," she replied, turning slowly to face the young driver.

"Oh... Th-that should be nice," he stuttered, silently reproaching himself for almost letting his customary "O. K." slip out in front of an old woman. She would surely have taken it as a sign of bad manners.

"My son is in the Gulistan prison."

The clutch began to whine, for Kudrat had mashed it to lower his speed for an oncoming car and was letting up on it gradually. "You and your big mouth!" he cursed himself

and busily downshifted to reduce his speed. He let up on the clutch. But the old woman continued:

"He's already been in prison for six months," she said with a mother's sigh. "My Muhamedjan has a three-year sentence."

"He must have done something," muttered Kudrat indistinctly. "You don't go to jail for just sitting around looking pretty."

"He wasn't to blame," moaned the old woman, shaking her head. "He was a truck driver, too," she added in hopes that this would be sufficient explanation. "He and his friends from the garage were out drinking. They had a few too many and got into an argument. His buddies jumped poor Muhamedjan and started to beat him up, but he had a knife—he was only trying to scare them."

"That means he did something after all," said Kudrat, continuing to feel extremely awkward.

"He wasn't to blame," the old woman repeated stubbornly. "Muhamedjan is a good boy. Kindhearted. But he's so hot-tempered. It's the vodka that's to blame for all his problems."

"And I never quite manage to buy that scarf for my mother," Kudrat thought to himself all at once. They were already coming down from the pass, and there was less snow. But Kudrat shivered: the cabin seemed cold. He even rolled up the window. Willows and almonds came into sight once more. He caught sight of tractors between two hills working the fields in the distance. Soon it would be time to plant the cotton that had brought prosperity to this region. The ground was already dry: a cloud of dust followed in the tractor's wake.

The old woman was still carrying on about Muhamedjan. She was obviously upset by the fact that Kudrat thought badly of him. Muhamedjan was her youngest—the last of six children. But for various reasons, the older ones had all died: he was the only one left. Muhamedjan had been born three months before the beginning of the war. His father was called up and never returned.

"My mother had to raise me and my sister by herself, too," thought Kudrat. True, he had been born after the war. His father had come home with a chest full of medals and ruined health. Kudrat barely remembered his father, for he had lived only a few years after he got home.

"While you're raising your children, your bones ache, and once they're grown, your heart aches," said the old woman. "My Muhamedjan didn't want to go to college, and he didn't feel like getting a job right after high school. 'Let him have a break,' I thought. 'He's got his whole life ahead of him, and there'll be plenty of time for working later.' He didn't loaf for long, but when he did get a job, he didn't like it. So he tried something else, and that didn't suit him either. And it kept on like that until he became a truck driver. Then he got married. 'Well,' I thought, 'I guess I'll have some grandchildren to look after.' And now I do. Three of them. And the fourth's on the way. My daughter-in-law works at the school... And now here's my Muhamedjan in prison for three years, and me with all those little ones. We've got a hard row to hoe, we do."

The Gulistan prison was some distance from town. The iron gates were painted an unexpected shade of spring green.

Kudrat stopped by the gates. The old woman reached into her bag and got four boiled eggs, a pomegranate, and two cakes, and tried to hand them to Kudrat...

"You're probably hungry after this long drive. These cakes are fresh. I baked them myself. They've got pumpkin in them."

But Kudrat refused, saying: "Keep them. Your son won't be able to buy pies like that for any amount of money where he is."

But the old woman misunderstood him and quickly took a handkerchief tied in a knot from her pocket. There were a few of one-rouble bills in the handkerchief.

"Here, take this instead. That will leave me enough for the return trip, and I can still buy a little something for my grandchildren and tell them it's from their father."

Kudrat took the money and helped the old woman carry her heavy bag to the prison gate. But on the way, unnoticed, he slipped her money and his own twenty-seven into the bag.

"I guess Mother won't get her scarf this trip either," he thought gloomily as he returned to the truck.

The students had also gotten out; they were already at the intersection, but they were yelling and making so much noise they didn't even notice him.

Spring was even more noticeable in the city. The leaves

were older, a darker green. It was warm, and there were happy children swarming all over the gardens and parks.

“Well, I guess Mother can do without her shawl for a while,” thought Kudrat, trying to bolster his mood. “It’s spring now, and the sun is shining. Everything will be O. K.”



1974

ABDUSALOM
ATABAEV



MY FATHER'S FACE

Every time I go to Isfara from my present home in Dushanbe, I set out for my native village to visit my father's grave. A leafy plane tree towers above the site of his eternal rest. I sit under it and listen to the multitude of leaves rustle in the wind.

Many years ago, this tree was not here. I remember quite well. Who could have planted it? It could hardly have been my mother or grandmother. Surely they would have told me if they had. They would certainly have taken me with them to help... It couldn't have just sprung up in exactly this spot—or could it?..

I listen to the leaves and imagine that my father is standing next to me whispering that he has come to life again in the form of this tree.

The branches sway almost unnoticeably and brush against the leaves, broad as a man's palm, that just keep rustling and rustling. What are they trying to tell me? What does my father want to say to me?.. I sit quietly, head bowed, listening to my father...

When this plane tree appeared over my father's grave, to honor his memory, our fellow villagers planted the whole road to the cemetery in plane trees, and a shady path that made everything even more beautiful came into being as the trees grew bigger.

I was only three years old when my father left for the front, and I hardly remembered his face. Just that he had a long black mustache. And so every time I would see a strange man with a mustache, I would follow him about with trepidation wondering if he were my father or not, staring at his face and hoping he would smile at me. After all, I

didn't really remember my own father or what he looked like, and there were a lot of men with mustaches. Both my grandmother and my mother had described him to me: what kind of eyes he had, his forehead and eyebrows and nose, but I still couldn't picture what his face looked like. I could see his mustache and nothing more. But I comforted myself with the thought that the war would be over soon, and he would come home. Then I would see for myself what he looked like...

I counted the days waiting for him to return and spent hours on end standing by the roadside.

Then our neighbor, Auntie Khanifa, got a letter saying her husband had been killed at the front, and I found out that my friend Sirodj was without a father. Wailing and loud lamentations were heard from their house, and people from all over the village came to comfort and support them in their hour of grief. After that, an inkling of fear gnawed at my heart, for I had thought that everyone came home from a war healthy and alive. The men would go to the front, defeat the fascists, destroy their tanks and airplanes, and then come back home. That was what I thought war was like until the letter about Sirodj's father came. But it seemed war was something quite different: people perished and were buried right there on the battlefield. And my heart was filled with terror for fear something like that might happen to my own father... But everything within me cried out: "No! No, I have to see my father! .. I want to see what he looks like! "

After that first letter, all of us—mother, grandmother, and I—would freeze with terror whenever our mailman, the long-bearded Boborahmat, came up to our house. The ground would tremble under our feet, our hearts would sink, and our eyes go blind with fear while the moment of uncertainty dragged on. But I realized all of this, of course, after I was older.

Boborahmat was a wise man and knew what happened whenever he appeared, so he would calm us immediately, shouting out:

"Don't be afraid..."

And we would breathe easier at once. My grandmother, hunched with age, would exclaim: "Allah be praised! " and lean more heavily upon her cane. And I would shake the end of Boborahmat's coat and jump for joy.

"Where is the letter from Dad? Please, give us the letter from my dad! " I would plead.

Mama would place her hand reverentially on the old man's shoulder and touch her eyes with the tips of her fingers, repeating over and over:

"May Allah grant you good health always."

Boborahmat's simple "don't be afraid" banished the terror from our hearts and gave us hope. For when he said that, it meant he was bringing us not a death notice but a letter from a loved one. When a letter was received, it was pressed lovingly to the eyes, and despite all his objections, the postman was given a handful of raisins or dried apricots.

But if Boborahmat stopped silently at the threshold with his head lowered, people knew he was expressing his sympathy, and they froze where they were standing, struck dumb with terror. The sensible Boborahmat did not inform anyone of the death or cause pain to the relatives of the deceased: he comforted them gently and tenderly.

"Don't be so upset. Maybe it's a mistake. There's always hope."

He would never actually deliver the fearful letter: he would leave with it in his hand. And when he left, the cry of lamentation would be raised, and the whole village would be plunged into mourning. We called the days we mourned the fallen 'black days'. And they were black indeed.

Though I was a very little boy—still wet behind the ears, as my mother would say—I knew well the meaning of mourning and understood our communal grief. I suffered along with everyone else.

Sirodj and I would not play noisy children's games. Almost every day we would go out to the Muminak road to wait for the mailman and find out what kind of news he bore and for whom.

Once, I asked Sirodj why he went to wait for Boborahmat.

"Well, may be Dad will come home..." was his reply.

But how could that be? His mother had gotten a letter, after all. So why did he keep hoping his father was still alive? People couldn't come back from the dead, could they?

Sirodj seemed to guess my thoughts and said:

"There were a couple of people who came back in the city even though their families had gotten notices saying they were dead."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, really. Boborahmat told my mother," he replied, looking somewhere beyond me.

I realized my words had hurt him, for without saying anything more, he walked over to the mulberry tree, cut off a switch, peeled the leaves off, and started to trace patterns in the dust on the road.

I felt guilty, but didn't know how to ease my guilt. I wanted badly to make him feel better, so suddenly I asked him:

"Sirodj, would you recognize your father if he were to come walking down the road?"

"Sure! I was already five when he left for the war! He took me to the bazaar and bought me salted peas," he responded proudly.

"You know, I don't remember what my Dad looked like at all. I only remember that he had a long mustache," I said gloomily. "Mama says I was only three when he left..."

Sirodj stared at me in surprise: how could I possibly not know my own father?! Maybe I was lying... Then he told me:

"Don't worry, I know your Dad, Abdullo! I remember what he looked like plain as day..."

"But how can *you* remember my Dad?! " I asked in disbelief.

"It's easy. He was tall and had a long mustache. He used to take me for rides on his tractor all the time."

I knew my father had been a tractor driver and that after he had left for the front, Salima had been driving his old tractor.

Sirodj pointed to a large field and said:

"Your father plowed all that earth with his tractor."

I stared at the green field and didn't notice that tears were streaming down my cheeks—tears of longing for my father.

* * *

Whenever she was praying for my father, my grandmother, a devout Muslim, would say to Allah:

"May Hitler's house burn to the ground, and may all his armies die of the plague. May all who have left return safely home, my son among them! "

One day, Mama woke me at sunrise:

"Get up, son. Naimdjon's father has come home from the war! "

I jumped up and ran out into the courtyard, thinking Naimdjon's father had come to visit us. But there was no one outside.

"Where is he? Where is he?" I cried to my mother.

"He's at his house," she explained.

And I ran barefooted, just as I was, to Naimdjon's house as fast as if it were not his father but mine who had come home. Maybe it was really my father and he had just forgotten the way to our house. Or maybe he had just stopped by Naimdjon's on his way to us. After all, it was just across the street.

I ran into their courtyard and saw Naimdjon's father, and right away my hopes were dashed, for this man had no mustache. That meant it wasn't my father who had come after all. And there was Naimdjon hugging his neck. Just then, Sirodj came tearing up, and we stood in the corner of the courtyard looking enviously at Naimdjon.

Uncle Muhiddin—for that was Naimdjon's father's name—had already taken off his uniform and was wearing an ordinary robe. But one sleeve was empty for some reason. It surprised me greatly.

"Where is his arm?" I asked Sirodj in a whisper.

"The fascists ate it," he answered.

I looked at Sirodj in disbelief.

"What do you mean, 'The fascists ate it'?! Do you mean to tell me the fascists eat people's arms?" I inquired, still doubting the truth of what he had said.

"The fascists are just like demons. They're cannibals. That's why they're called fascists," he explained.

I was terrified. That meant the fascists ate people. Why would anyone want to do a thing like that? Maybe they had eaten Sirodj's father. They must have eaten him, or else his mother wouldn't have gotten a notice saying he was dead!

* * *

I turned seven, and I already knew what war was and all about Hitler and his soldiers. They were cruel, evil people who destroyed cities and burned houses. And now I knew that not only death notices came from the front but one-armed men as well.

After Naimdjon's father came back, I waited every day with my mother and grandmother for my own father to come home, but we got only letters. Then one evening, we were sitting in the courtyard, Sirodj and his mother came running up, all out of breath.

"Good news, good news!" shouted Auntie Khanifa, hand pressed to her heart, totally out of breath from running.

"What is it? What's happened? Tell me quickly!" exclaimed Mother, rising in expectation.

"He's come! He's come!" was all Auntie Khanifa could manage to get out.

"I can't believe it!" my grandmother moaned, trying to get up, but her legs wouldn't obey her. Mother got so confused she didn't know where to put the cup she was holding. I sprang from my seat, struck dumb with surprise, and stood staring at Auntie Khanifa and Sirodj. "That means the notice they got was wrong! Boborahmat must have known what he was talking about when he said that some people in the city had come back even after their families had gotten notices," I thought.

"Congratulations! Someone saw him in Muminak!" Auntie Khanifa told us excitedly.

Finally Grandmother realized what the glad news was, jumped up from the clay ledge, tore the scarf from her head, and ran through the courtyard and onto the street. She ran so quickly, we couldn't catch up with her.

Near the school, we saw a man wearing a greatcoat. He was hobbling our way on his crutches. Only one leg poked out from under the coat, and it squeaked loudly. When I looked more closely, I saw that it was made of wood! It wasn't a human leg creaking so, but a piece of wood. What in the world had happened to this man? I shook with terror. Where were his legs? Could it be that the fascists had eaten them? They really were cannibals! Sirodj was right!

His chest was covered with medals, among them, the big gold star of a Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest award a soldier could be given.

Grandmother clasped her hands in grief, then ran to embrace the man in the greatcoat. My mother pressed her face to his shoulder.

When I could finally tear my eyes from the medals, I looked up at the man's face to see that he indeed had a long

black mustache! My father's mustache! And the ground began to tremble and spin under me. The man in the greatcoat was my father! My Dad had come home at last!

"Father, Father dear!" I shouted and threw my arms about his neck.

* * *

The festivities at our house lasted a whole week. My father sat me upon his shoulders and I combed his mustache. Looking back, it seems that week was the best in my whole life.

One day, I heard Mother tell Grandmother:

"His whole body is covered with wounds and horrible scars... Surely a stronger man never lived!"

"You know what they say, 'Man is harder than stone and more fragile than a flower,'" replied Grandmother cryptically.

Yes, for a whole week we had one big holiday at our house, and then suddenly it ended in grief.

I was awakened that morning by the heart-rending wails of my mother and grandmother. I rubbed my eyes and opened them to see my father lying next to me quite dead, his head pressed to my side, an arm around my shoulders. I saw that it was true, but could not believe it.

I couldn't even cry: I could only call out, "Daddy, Daddy dear!" again and again.

Much later, I realized that like Sirodj's my own father might have been killed on the battlefield in mortal combat with the fascists. But I was luckier. My Dad came home, despite his mortal wounds, through fire and smoke, overcoming all pain and suffering. He came home and gave me, his only son, the memory of his face, his thoughtful gaze, his lovely smile, and his hearty voice. A memory to last a lifetime.





THE BITTER TASTE OF
TRUTH

I've written a lot about my childhood, and in fact this is the only thing I've really held back. How many times the words have been on the tip of my tongue! How many tormented, sleepless nights I spent knowing that until I owned up, I would have no peace.

But it's not as easy as it may seem, or I would have confessed long ago. The events I have concealed for so long reveal something of me I do not want to remember myself, much less have anyone else know... But all the same, today I have decided to rid myself of the secret I have kept locked up in my heart for more than a quarter of a century. This silence is no longer tolerable: indeed my conscience demands that I tell the truth at last, no matter how bitter it may be. For now I know that people who conceal the truth are lying to themselves.

And so here is the unfortunate sequence of events which have been such a bitter lesson for me throughout my life.

But before I begin, I must explain that my father was not the jolly, quick-witted old man he is today. When I say "papa", you must imagine a man long and lean as a bean pole with two hollow sockets in place of eyes, forever gloomy and laconic. The other village boys were always wondering what had made him look so sullen. But deep down, I knew he wasn't really that way: he just didn't laugh much or tell jokes too often. It was hard to say why he was so humorless. Perhaps it was the proper way to be in the lean years right after the war. Who knows?

Usually when he returned from the field in the evening, tired and glum, he would plop down on a stump by the gate with a sigh and ask for a cup of buttermilk. While mother

was getting it, he would ask us two or three questions and tell us briefly what needed to be done. When he had drunk the buttermilk, he would rise silently, pick up his hoe, and set off for the vegetable garden where he would work until dark. Mother often said that our kitchen garden was what actually put the food in our mouths.

I was eleven, going on twelve. True, I still wasn't too good with a hoe, but in all other duties, I helped my parents obediently and assiduously. I watered the garden and fed the cow, hauled the firewood home from the mountains, and even carried the corn to the mill with my brother a couple of times.

Salim, my younger brother, was in the third grade, and since he was one of the best pupils in the class, he put on grand airs. He always got the best of whatever my parents brought home. If he drew a measly little picture, he'd praise himself to the skies and say he was going to be a great artist one day. He always carried a piece of chalk or coal about in his pocket, and he'd draw on all the stones along the roadside. One day he drew a picture of our dog Spotty on a boulder, and from that day, our trusty canine has stared at me in mute reproach. Nor has Salim ever passed up a chance to tease me with this drawing.

Actually, Salim was not a bad sort, but I had no particular reason to be overly fond of him. He was so skinny and pale all the grown-ups felt sorry for him, and Mother would give him cream behind my back. Many's the time he would sneak out of the kitchen licking his lips like a gummy cat. But still, his little neck was so thin, it was a miracle he could hold up his head which was elongated and rounded like a gourd. My uncle said you could kill him by just tweaking his nose, and sure enough, if you bumped him even slightly, he would fall down.

One day, Salim and I set off to the mountains for firewood. We hadn't far to go: about an hour on foot. Our puppy Spotty tagged along after us. He was only two or three months old at the time: no one knew for sure. We had found him in a big hole in the yard at the collective farm, and he was so filthy that our neighbor, Antie Gulsum, took him for a baby jackal. Mother was quite distressed:

"What new-dug grave did you find him in?" she scolded me. "It's a baby jackal if I ever saw one..."

"Salim found him, not me. I just climbed down into the

hole and got him out." In any case, I let it be known that Salim had had something to do with the affair. Who knew how it might all turn out? If we got punished, there would be less for each if we shared it. Or maybe nothing would happen, as Salim was generally forgiven all his misdeeds. After all, he was sickly and a good student.

"What have you gone and done, you wretched little gravedigger!" exclaimed my mother, who was not to be placated. "Tonight the jackals will come after him and kill all the chickens."

The poor animal trembled and looked from one to the other of us in utter confusion.

Fortunately, my grandfather turned up just at that moment. He squinted, examined our acquisition carefully, and declared authoritatively:

"What's all this fuss about? It's nothing but a puppy. A little puppy; nothing more!"

"Hurrah! It's a puppy!" Salim and I shouted with glee.

Then we started fighting over who it should belong to, and since it was impossible to divide, we agreed that the puppy would belong to the both of us. We always came to an agreement quickly if we realized that a timely compromise was the only solution.

When we had washed the puppy, he turned out to be spotty, so that's what we decided to name him: Spotty. The poor little thing was hungry, but instead of giving him something to eat, we tried to guess what kind of dog he was and where he had come from. Suddenly it occurred to us that he hadn't eaten yet, so we got him some bread and milk and made him a dog house of straw.

From that day forth, no matter where we went, Spotty was not far behind. Slipping constantly on the steep slopes, he would clamber up the mountains after us and sit faithfully beside us when we rested. When we raced one another, he would be hot on our tracks. In a word, we were inseparable.

In a month, Spotty could tell us from everyone else. He would invariably give a warning bark if a stranger came around. If the stranger came into the yard, he would howl at the top of his voice until we came out and calmed him down. A bit later, he learned to tell our animals from the rest. In the evenings when the herd returned from pasture, our cow and three goats would come into the yard on their own. But if one of them violated the appointed order or

headed for the grape vines, Spotty would be there in a moment. And if someone else's goat wandered into our yard by mistake, Spotty would not calm down until he had driven the unfortunate beast out the gate.

Actually, he was afraid of the goats, and his bark contained as much a plea that they leave on their own as a warning. When our neighbor went away for a while and left his goat with us, the poor dog was in a frenzy all night: he was convinced that the crafty beast was in our yard by mistake and had wormed his way into our confidence. He was sure the creature would wait until we were all sound asleep and then wreak some havoc. Mother was pleased with his behavior and treated him with considerable respect from that day forth.

In those days, there was no electricity in our village, and the villagers had no idea what a refrigerator was. We had never even heard of such a thing. There were stories about rich men who had cellars that were filled with snow in the winter and covered over with earth. Not all the snow would melt in the summer, and the cellar was like a refrigerator of sorts... It seems I've gotten off the subject. What was I talking about? Oh, yes... There was no electricity in our village, nor were there any refrigerators. Nor were there any stalls where meat was sold. Usually, when a goat or an old cow was slaughtered, part of the meat was sold, and part was made into dry-cure jerky for the use of the family. Every night, mother would tie salted meat that had not dried completely to a stick and let it stand in the fresh air.

One night, a rather large piece of meat fell down, and Spotty guarded it till morning to keep the cats from making short work of it. Mother had hardly gotten out of bed when he ran to fetch her, racing back and forth between her and the meat, wagging his tale and whining to try to explain what had happened. If it hadn't been for Spotty, the whole piece would have been eaten by the cats.

Spotty was a smart dog, but I, fool that I was, gave him away.

On the one hand, it was a good thing to give him to the shepherd at the collective farm, but on the other... The whole story still torments me whenever I remember it. Because of it, I've never had a dog since, and if anyone brings them up in a conversation, I immediately think of Spotty. And no words could express how guilty I feel.

I already said that Salim and I had gotten the axe and some rope and had set off to the mountains for firewood. Spotty followed us as usual. We had gathered two bundles of brushwood and tied them up and were already getting ready to leave when the flock of sheep from the collective farm appeared over the ridge. Two enormous dogs big as bears raced toward us barking their heads off. We scampered up a nearby juniper in fright, and Spotty, whining in fright, ran about under the tree. We shouted for the shepherds to come and rescue us. Fortunately, it turned out alright in the end. The dogs with their unbelievably big heads sniffed at our puppy and, finding nothing suspicious about him, began to play with him. From our perch above, we could tell that the poor thing didn't feel much like playing: he was so frightened, all he wanted to do was run away, but the two dogs blocked his way.

The shepherd finally came and chased the dogs away, so we climbed down from the tree.

"Someone must be praying for you. You were lucky there was a tree to climb nearby," the youngish shepherd told us, holding his crook with his only hand: he had lost the other at the front more than likely. "They wouldn't have bitten you, but they surely would have scared you to death."

"Nothing doing! They would have bitten our heads off!" sobbed the mortally offended Salim, wiping his tears.

"These dogs won't bite little boys. Even a wolf won't touch a child. Of course, if you were to touch a sheep or try to chase one, then they'd make short work of you." At that point, the shepherd noticed our puppy and waved at him: "Hey, you there, little mutt..."

Spotty felt something was wrong and ran even farther away.

"Call your doggie. I want to have a look at him," the shepherd asked us. "I think he's a pure-bred."

So I caught Spotty, but he bared his teeth, and growled. As if nothing had happened, the one-armed shepherd grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and held him up at arm's length. Still, Spotty managed to slip out of his hand and run away again. Barking at the top of his voice, he scampered over to Salim, who was standing some distance away, in search of protection.

"Why don't you give us your puppy," the shepherd said

in an insistent tone of voice, "and let him grow up with our dogs."

"Why should we do that? He's fine with us."

"He'll be wasted with you. A dog should grow up with a pack of other dogs. He'll be ruined if he grows up with nothing but people... Here, take this," he said, offering me some money. I hadn't noticed him taking the bills from his pocket.

"No, I don't need your money," I prattled hurriedly. I had never had so much money in my life, and the thought of it made my head swim. I stared at Salim in hopes of assistance, but he was just standing there with his mouth open from shock.

"Take it. You can buy yourselves another puppy. There are lots of them running around the village... And let me have this one: he can help us herd the sheep at the collective farm. You're a Young Pioneer, and a clever lad after all. Here's a chance for you to serve your country! "

"I'll bring you another one..." I said, but my words sounded unconvincing. I could not take my eyes off the money and was afraid the shepherd would change his mind and stuff the bills back into his pocket.

"Here, give this to your brother," he said and pulled another bill out of his pocket. At that point, I didn't even make any pretense of protesting. "Hold him while I tie him up," said the shepherd, and his commanding tone no longer sounded offensive.

The shepherd tied a rope around his neck and led him away, not taking any further notice of us. Spotty squirmed and whined, begging us to help him. I turned to stone and wished mightily that I were deaf so that I wouldn't have to listen to his pitiful howls. The poor puppy still thought we would rescue it and called out to us, not believing as yet that we had betrayed it. It seemed the howling would never stop... Many years have passed since that day, but those mournful cries still ring in my ears.

At the time, true enough, I quickly forgot about Spotty, because I had all that money to worry about. It seemed to me that we had made a good bargain. Of course, money went a lot farther then than it does now, but still, neither of us had ever held so much money in his hand.

Salim and I quickly divided the money between us and decided what we would buy. I wanted some fish hooks and

maybe even a cast-net. Salim wanted a pack of colored pencils. The whole way home, we could talk of nothing but our newfound wealth.

By the end of our walk, we had cooled down a bit, and an insidious, creeping melancholy pressed in upon our joy. But neither of us dared to mention it to the other.

"When Papa finds out you've sold Spotty, he'll tan your hide but good," said Salim, unable to hold back any longer.

"Why should he be angry? After all, we gave him up for the collective farm flocks. And you remember what the shepherd said: 'You're Young Pioneers. Here's a chance for you to do something for your country.' Imagine, maybe one day our Spotty will save a sheep from a pack of wolves. That's all anyone will talk about! They'll all wonder who that brave dog belonged to. When they find out, the chairman of the collective farm will come to our school and give us certificates of honor in front of everyone." I said this as much to soothe my own conscience as to calm myself.

"Did you tell that shepherd that the dog didn't belong just to you?"

"I didn't have to: he knew already. He gave both of us money, after all."

"But why did he put it all in your pocket?" Salim persisted.

"I was just closer to him. That's all. Didn't you hear him say, 'This is for your brother'?"

But all the same, Salim tried to prove that we had played different roles in the bargaining, and every time it came out as if he had had nothing to do with it. He could quite easily have told our parents about the whole thing then and there, but still we agreed not to. If either of them asked where Spotty was, we were to tell them that the shepherd had taken him for the collective farm, but without saying a word about the money.

No one noticed Spotty was missing until the next day. The first to raise the alarm was Grandmother, and after her, our mother. We gave the explanation we had agreed upon. She grumbled a bit, then quieted down. And my father didn't even bring the subject up: it was too insignificant to be worthy of comment.

Our fears were alleviated, but there was no understanding grown-ups, to be sure: sometimes they would get all worked up over nothing, and at others, they would hardly take

notice of some major misdeed. We probably got off so easily because we had the chairman of the collective farm behind us: after all, the farm had taken our puppy for its own purposes, and the collective farm was no laughing matter in those days. Nor was the chairman's word to be taken lightly.

Time passed, and everyone forgot about Spotty. No one would ever have found out what actually happened there under the juniper tree if it hadn't been for the fact that Salim violated our agreement.

That day, I was all ready to go to the mill to get half a sack of sorghum ground. Salim was supposed to go get the grass for fodder. After giving us the usual instructions, Father set off for work. Mama helped me load the donkey, then I climbed up myself and set off for the mill. Salim tagged along behind me trying to get me to let him go, too.

"Cut it out! " I said waving him away.

But what could I do if my parents had told him to stay at home. I had no intentions of humoring his bad behavior. But Salim grabbed the donkey by the tail and held on. "Let go! " I ordered him, but he wouldn't listen. I had a long switch in my hand. I had hardly hit him with it when he began to howl. Then he picked up a stone and chunked it at my head. The blood flowed heavily and covered my whole face. I was taken home at once and put to bed. An old piece of felt was burned to close up the wound. Salim ran off somewhere and did not show up until evening.

When Father came home from work, he asked what had happened and then went after my brother.

"Salim! .. Hey, Salim! .. Salim! " he shouted from the roof of the cow shed.

After a while, Salim appeared. His head was lowered, and he did not raise his eyes to look at anyone.

"Now you'll get what's coming to you! " I said, not without malice.

With head hung, Salim stood before our father who waited silently for an explanation.

"Well, out with it," Father said angrily. "Tell me why you threw a stone at him."

We were terrified of our father at such times. He never struck us, but his threatening appearance was more than

enough to keep us out of mischief.

"He ... he sold Spotty... He sold him to the shepherd. He took money for our dog! " Salim spurted out, swallowing his tears.

I felt as if I'd had the breath knocked out of me: never in a million years had I expected to be betrayed so blatantly.

"What?" snapped my father, not believing his ears.

Salim had not yet got the words out when he stopped him with a slap.

"That's what you get for trying to put the blame on someone else! "

Salim ran from the house with a howl. Then it was my turn.

"The shepherd ... for the collective farm flock... He said..." I sputtered indistinctly. But my father wasn't listening.

"You little sneak! Only the worst sort of a villain sells his friends! "

He gave me such a look that should the earth have miraculously split open, I would gladly have thrown myself into the abyss just to avoid his glare. I would have preferred a beating by far. His eyes were filled with pain and contempt. I have never in my life experienced anything so terrible as that agonized glance. And even now, when I think of it, I quake and get goose pimples.

I had to experience all that to learn that a bad deed, no matter with what noble motives it is disguised, remains bad all the same.



THE FLOOD

(From the cycle *Mountain
Legends*)

1



The days were overcast, for the sun rarely poked through the boisterous clouds that scurried continuously across the spring sky. But when it did peek through, gay shadows ran across the ground

before it, and the air grew warm.

There were frequent showers which ranged from drizzles to downpours. The rains and snows melting on the mountain tops made the rivers overflow their banks: the muddy, foamy streams flowed down into the valley, washing away everything in their paths. The water washed away the suspension bridge, and the village of Garibak was cut off from the rest of the world. From three sides, the mountains made the village utterly inaccessible, and now, the river raged on the fourth.

Every Saturday, the young teacher would cross the bridge and follow the path into the city, and he would return early Monday morning. He always hurried as if he were afraid he would be late for something or other. No one knew where he was going, and no one saw him pass the mill early in the morning and walk quickly across the bridge. No one but the miller's daughter who would follow him stealthily with her gaze.

Now that the river had carried the bridge away, he made his way across with the aid of a flotation device—a bladder made of leather—or sometimes he would go on horseback.

But one day, the miller's daughter did not see the familiar figure: the sun was setting, but still he had not appeared. "What could have happened to him? Why hasn't he come?" she worried to herself. She was seized by an incomprehen-

ble alarm and set out for the shore.

The rivulets that ran from both sides of the main stream sparkled merrily in the sun. They disappeared behind the hills below, barely distinguishable in the thick fog. The village was but a tiny emerald against the background of the enormous mountains.

There was no one on the far shore. The girl stared into the distance for a long time and finally caught sight of a small dark figure headed toward the river. It was the teacher at last.

When the teacher reached the shore, he tied his things to his back and plunged into the water, holding tightly to the flotation bladder.

The swift current seized him, and the waves washed over his head. A few seconds later, he appeared in a trough in the midst of the turbulent waves, but soon he disappeared once more.

"Allah preserve him! " she thought, not knowing if there was anyone else with sufficient power to do so at that point. She peered tensely at the waves and finally saw him in the middle of the river. He stopped to rest on a small island to get ready for the most difficult part of the crossing.

The girl calmed down a bit. "Who is he to me that I should be so concerned for his safety?" she thought. "Maybe Father is watching me! " She sneaked a stealthy glance behind her to make sure she was really alone. But there was no one at the mill. She turned around and decided to head for home, but some force beyond her comprehension bade her turn her gaze to the river once more.

A mighty wave tossed the teacher into the air and tore the bladder from his hands. "If the wave washes over him, he is lost." She was drawn back toward the shore against her will. "By the grace of Allah, may he get hold of his bladder at least. Oh, let him catch it! "

The teacher flailed his arms and legs desperately and managed to grasp his flotation device. The girl's heart beat like that of a captive bird.

The teacher made it through the rushing current and crawled onto the shore. The miller's daughter ran up to him, for it seemed to her that he was barely conscious. Perhaps she should call her father and have him carry the half-drowned man to their house near the shore.

But the teacher met her with a smile. Probably he himself

didn't know why he was grinning so. The girl stopped short in confusion.

"Why were you so late in coming?" she asked him, reproachfully, the words as much a surprise to him as to her.

"Were you waiting for me, then?" he asked, still smiling.

The girl frowned, turned on her heel, and set off for home at a run.

Since that moment, she hadn't been able to put him out of her mind.

II

Early Monday morning, the miller's daughter was by the riverbank. The breeze from the mountains caressed her face and tresses. She took off her shoes and carefully dipped her feet in the water. It seemed as if a thousand needles pierced her skin at once. "How can he ford such an icy river?"

"Are you waiting for me again?" she heard a familiar voice from behind.

She started, spun around, and almost bumped into the teacher.

"Do you think I have nothing better to do?" she replied tartly, tossing her head and traipsing off to the mill without so much as a backward glance. But as soon as she reached the thicket of osier, and was quite convinced he couldn't see her, she spun around and peered at the river in agitation.

The teacher had already reached the other shore, so she calmed down and slowly set off for home.

At that early hour, the miller's daughter looked like the first tulip of spring in her bright red dress.

III

All week, she awaited the much cherished meeting eagerly, heading for the river at the customary hour on Saturday morning. There was someone near the water. She approached uncertainly. Hearing her steps, the figure turned around. It was indeed the teacher. Her heart beat wildly and overflowed with tenderness.

She noticed that the teacher's face was pale and drawn.

"What in the world has happened?"

At first, he did not answer, but she looked at him with such genuine anguish that he could not remain silent.

"I got caught in a whirlpool and almost drowned, but as you can see, I'm still in one piece."

"Who forces you to risk your life so casually?" she asked with unexpected malice.

"No one."

"Then you want me to believe you just do it for fun?"

The teacher stared thoughtfully into the distance as if he alone saw something no one else could see.

"Of course I don't do it just for fun," came his subdued reply. "I go across the river to see my father."

"Can't he wait a month? The water will go down by then, and they'll fix the bridge."

But the teacher distained to answer.

"Doesn't he worry about you? You might drown in this damned river. Just look how much water there is! " Her eyes were pleading, but her voice was angry. Then she turned her gaze toward the river. The water roared as if indignant that the teacher had escaped its icy embrace alive.

"Certainly he's worried about me. Every time, he asks me not to come again until the river has gone down. But I can't wait that long. I can't simply leave him all alone until they rebuild the bridge."

"Isn't there anyone who can look after him for you? Is he ill?"

"The neighbors try to help out all they can, but you see, he's an invalid. He lost both his legs in the war. And if you could only see how glad it makes him when I come. He grins like a little boy... Then, too, my mother died not long ago..."

The teacher smiled grimly and fell silent.

The girl's irritation melted into a feeling of concern.

"Can't you find a job closer to home?" she asked shyly.

"Sure I could, but that's not the point. Before the war, my father was the first teacher in Garibak. But he couldn't come back here after the war was over. So when I graduated from college, I asked to be sent to his old school."

The miller's daughter trained a long, unwavering gaze on him.

"Excuse me, but I have to go. My father is probably worried about me."

"Yes, of course..."

"But wait a minute if you can..." she said and ran off to the mill without giving him a chance to reply. She returned with a small bundle.

"Here are some pomegranates from our garden. Take them to your father..."

IV

Now she waited for Monday to come. The river still raged, but that morning the teacher appeared like clockwork. He blew up his flotation bladder and walked down to the water, but stood for a long time as if waiting for something.

The girl came up behind him, quiet as a mouse.

"Are you afraid?"

The teacher turned around to face her.

The wind blew the skirt of her bright dress out like a sail.

"What is there to be afraid of?" he asked with a laugh.

"I asked you if you were afraid?" she egged him on.

"When I have such lovely eyes as yours to will me safely across, I could not possibly fear the wildest of rivers."

This time she did not grow angry, but blushed and dropped her eyes in embarrassment. When she raised them, the teacher was already on the other side. She ran up a nearby hillock and looked after him until he disappeared from view.

V

The old miller fixed the loose board on the drain, sat down on the clay ledge by the house, and looked out at the river. His daughter was hurrying home, constantly gazing hither and yon, first hurrying then slowing her pace.

He had noticed some time ago that she had begun to go down to the river quite often.

"She's lonely here all by herself," thought the miller.

When she walked up to him, he squinted and asked, "Did you lose something down by the river?"

But she went inside without answering him.

After his sons had left, the miller had realised how much he loved his daughter. They were all in college in the big city: he was proud of them but missed them dreadfully.

"Children are like birds. As soon as they feel how strong their wings are, they fly away at once," he would say. "And all their parents can do is watch how beautifully they soar."

For years, his children had been trying to convince him to leave the mill and take up an easier trade in his old age. But their elderly father would only laugh and say: "There's plenty of strength in my old arms yet. This mill has supported me all of my life, and it was the source of your bread and butter as well! The flour I make here feeds me even now. People need flour, so they need millers, and that means they need me..."

His daughter was the only one who understood him. She never tried to convince him to go into some other line of work. And that made the miller love her all the more. Whenever any of the old men would come around and start bragging about their sons and saying that in old age, sons were the only ones that could be counted on, the miller would grow angry and swear solemnly: "May Allah strike me blind if I ever value my dear daughter less than my sons."

The miller was proud of the fact that the girl kept no secrets from him. He always listened attentively and patiently to whatever she told him and tried to give her the best advice he could.

When she walked back out into the yard, the old man said with a smile:

"From times of old, our river has been called the Zeravshan, the Gold Bearer, because it brings us water. There is no gold in it. My daughter, it will do you no good to search for gold there, for all you will find are the lost years of youth which have slipped away in vain."

She was pensive for a moment, then said quietly:

"I seek there only my happiness."

"And have you found it, then?" he inquired cautiously.

"Almost."

"I tend to have my doubts," he chuckled. "But if you go and tell the river, maybe it will believe your tale."

"As it is, I've told it everything."

The wind rose toward evening, and peals of thunder rumbled in the mountains beyond. Lightning flashed about the snow-capped peaks in the distance. The girl walked down the road, but did not descend to the river: she went instead to the orchard by the mill. She stood under the trees watching

the wind lash the branches heavy with green apricots and apples. She thought of the teacher. The muddy water of the river rushed forward headlong, drowning out all other sounds with its menacing roar.

For some unknown reason, that year, the river did not recede after the annual spring flood tide, although the waters should have begun to go down long ago. The girl watched the leaden storm clouds ridding themselves of the water that weighted them down. Rain fell in buckets over the whole enormous space from the ravine below to the mountain tops, and still the heavens were thick with dark clouds. That meant the rains would continue for some time, and the waters would not abate for much longer than usual.

She soon tired of looking at the sky, but she could gaze endlessly at the river.

Night set in from the east: gradually, the gray of twilight overcame the light of day. The water beat mercilessly against the mill's wheel in a continuous, desperate moan. Nothing could be heard above the roaring of the river. The girl walked up the path until she caught sight of her father bending over the grain-bins, then she quickly retraced her steps.

The night was unusually dark, but the clouds had dissipated. The pale stars huddling far above peered down at the river, but did not recognize their own reflections.

The girl walked down to the river. It seemed to her that the roaring of the water had grown even more ominous. She quickened her pace, then broke into a run, tensely gazing into the dark. She noticed a shadow near the river.

"Could he have come in such bad weather?" she wondered.

As the shadow drew closer, she made out an enormous horse's head. The unexpectedness of it all frightened her, so she turned on her heel and began to run back up the path.

"Munavvara..." she heard the teacher's uncertain voice carried by the wind.

He sprang down from his mount, caught up with the girl, and took her by the hand. It was trembling. He felt something fill his chest as if a new soul had entered his body. The girl was crying.

"What's happened to you? Excuse me..."

The girl turned away and continued to cry.

"I had no intention of coming. My father said that if the mud flow didn't pass, I wasn't to come. Excuse me."

"But I had no way of knowing that," she said, swallowing to keep back her tears. "I've been worried to death and imagining all sorts of terrible things. If you had drowned, the river wouldn't be able to tell me, after all."

"That's why I came—to keep you from worrying. I borrowed a horse and came to let you know I was alright."

He took her by the other hand.

"Let's go," she said, pulling him toward the mill.

"Come on," she repeated shyly.

"Where?"

"To the mill."

"I can't... I have to go back."

"I won't let you. It's already so dark you can't see your hand in front of your face. Tomorrow I'll wake you early, and you can go on your way. You'll make it in time."

"But the horse's owner is waiting for me on the other shore. I promised to come back soon."

"Come with me," she urged him for the third time.

"I can't."

"You're afraid of my father," she said with disappointment. "That's why you won't come."

No one had ever been able to make the teacher blush. And this time, it was so dark the girl couldn't see how his cheeks flamed. "Maybe he really *is* afraid," she thought to herself.

So he followed her to the mill, stopping at the door to greet her father.

"Hello, glad to meet you. Come in, come in," the miller said calmly, his voice full of assurance.

The old man looked up at his guest. Although his eyes were weak, he recognized him at once: "It's Jabar's son, Imom." Their guest was wet from head to foot, and there wasn't a single button on his jacket. Isn't Imom the one who goes to the city every Saturday and returns on Monday morning? Maybe he's the one my daughter has been going to meet down by the river. Today she disappeared, and now she's come back with him in tow. Why has it taken me this long to figure out what's been going on? He recalled that his daughter had not answered his question of what it was she sought down by the river. Perhaps this is her gold.

The miller leaned over the grain-bin and scooped out some flour so fresh it was still warm. He began to pour it into a sack, but some of it spilled on the floor and got on

his apron. The air was so filled with the fine powder it smudged his gray head with splotches of white. A bit later, he straightened up and looked at the teacher and his daughter with surprise. Then he turned back to his task of filling the sacks on the floor before him with flour.

It seemed to the girl that he would never stop. The water beat against the mill wheel, filling the mill with a monotonous groan like a lamentation. But the miller's daughter knew it wasn't a lament at all. The mill stones turned as slowly as the earth turned on its axis, and the miller poured the flour into the sacks just as unhurriedly.

The juniper burning in the fireplace was smokeless, and a sooty kettle boiled merrily above the flames.

The teacher walked over to the fire, squatted down, and warmed his hands by it. He was so weak from exhaustion, he could not hold them extended for long. Soon, he lowered them to his knees and closed his eyes.

The miller continued pouring flour for a while, then sat down next to the sack and thought about something long and hard. The flour from the wheel permeated the air and got on his robe, but he didn't notice.

The grain ran out, and the mill stones began to grate against each other. The old man rose, poured in more grain, and looked over at the teacher. Then he walked firmly toward his daughter. The girl paled, but he continued past and went out to the barn. In a moment, she heard his heavy tread and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw that her father had thrown a woollen jacket over the teacher's shoulders. Then he had gone over to the kettle, poured a cup of tea, and offered it to their guest himself.

She felt an inexpressible tenderness for her aged father. She wanted to run over to him and hug him. Without raising his head, the old man ordered curtly:

"Warm up the soup!"



TEARS OF STONE



There was a cliff by the side of the road. From a distance, it looked black, but it was actually brown and covered with ripples and chipped spots. But there were no breaks or cracks. The cliff was as tall as a four-storey house, and it was known as the Big Rock.

The Big Rock was a long way from the village, and tired travelers would stop to rest in its shade. In the summer, it gave them shade, and in winter, it sheltered them from rain, snow, and icy winds.

One day, a raven with something like a nut in its beak lighted on the rock. Looking around to make sure it was safe, the raven clutched its prize and began to peck at it. Finally, the shell cracked, and the bird adroitly attempted to gobble up the tasty seeds within, but one fell into a narrow fissure in the rock. The raven's sharp eye could see the seed quite well, but there was no way it could be fished out, no matter how hard the bird tried. So it flew off in search of something else to eat. And the seed remained in the fissure of the Big Rock.

That was in the fall. Then came the winter with its cold rains and snowfalls. The seeds, blown by the wind to the foot of the Big Rock, dried up and rotted, but the seed dropped by the raven lived, and when it grew warmer, it put out a fragile shoot. At first, the shoot was puny and delicate. The wind bent it low to the ground, and the sun beat down upon it mercilessly. By midday, it was wilted and apathetic like a man drained of his last ounce of strength. But by evening, it had revived, straightened up, and was reaching skyward like a tiny arrow.

Finally, the shoot put out a miniature twig with tender fuzzy needles, and everyone could see that a juniper had

sprouted on the Big Rock. The juniper is one of the most beautiful trees found in the mountains of that area, and the local people call it the Bride of Kukhistan, as the mountainous area was known. In a few years, it had grown quite big and put its roots down so deep they reached to the very heart of the Big Rock.

"Hey, Juniper," the Big Rock said to the tree one day. "What do you think you're doing? Why have your roots twisted into me like so many worms?"

"I have to let my roots grow deep," replied the tree. "Otherwise, I'll die. I must have water and food to live."

"The Earth is so big," muttered the Big Rock. "Why couldn't you find some place else to grow aside from into me?"

"It is not my fault, brother. I was brought here by a raven, so you'll have to ask him why he did it."

"So now you're trying to argue with me?! " whined the Big Rock and began to squeeze the Juniper's roots. But the tree did not yield: it simply found new paths for its roots to pierce the rock in search of sustenance. The Juniper wanted to live a great deal.

Finally, the Rock gave in.

"Alright," it said to the Juniper, "go ahead and live."

No tree anywhere around was more beautiful: no passer-by could remain indifferent to its breath-taking splendour. Its dark green crown stood out against the blue of the sky, and from a distance, the stone looked like a black marble pedestal.

Many years passed, and there came a day when the narrow road that wound past the cliff had to be widened. An engineer rode along the site of the future highway. He paused by the Big Rock. The road was supposed to be wide and straight, but what could he do about the cliff? He could build the road around it, but it would be cheaper just to blow it up and leave the highway perfectly straight.

The engineer looked at the Big Rock for a long time. He walked all the way around it twice. He clambered up to the top, admired the Juniper, and observed the difficulty with which the tree had fought for its existence. The Big Rock hadn't given up the struggle yet: it had cut into the trunk with its sharp edges as if trying to crack the wood in two. For a moment, the engineer imagined that it was not a Rock and a Juniper he was looking at but two mighty wrestlers

locked together, each trying to best his opponent, shoulders pressed tight against each other. The engineer decided to spare the Juniper. He ordered the road to be cut through four metres lower. But one of the surveyors objected, saying that the rock looked like a tombstone and should be blown up.

"Nothing of the sort," said the engineer. "Just look how beautiful the juniper is."

Many supported the engineer, and finally, the road was built as he instructed. The Big Rock and the Juniper remained as before.

The road was completed two years later, and big trucks and busses full of passengers began to go down it. Through the windshields of their vehicles, it looked as if the Juniper were suspended in mid-air. The busses would stop by the Big Rock to let the passengers rest a bit and admire the landscape. It was cool at the top of the Big Rock, and people were enraptured with the Juniper. The elderly were especially delighted.

"Look here—that's how you have to struggle for life! "

People came and went: all day long, groups of travelers stopped near the Big Rock. It became a landmark and a traditional rest-stop for the tourists round-about.

But the new road still had not been approved by the official commission. This commission had been set up several months later. The four people on it were headed by a chairman, and one day they set out to inspect the new highway. The chairman searched vigilantly for flaws.

But they had driven a good half of the way, and he had not been able to find a single imperfection. If he had known the road had been designed and built so well, he would never have agreed to head the commission. It couldn't possibly be that such a long road had been completed with no major problems! Surely, the builders had overlooked something! Who would believe such a thing? They would say he had not taken his work seriously: he had done a bad job of inspecting the highway.

It was at that point in his ruminations that he caught sight of the Big Rock and the Juniper.

"Stop here," he told the driver.

The other members of the commission got out of the car in the chairman's wake. They still did not suspect anything. It just felt good to stretch their legs a bit. But the chairman

walked straight up to the Big Rock, threw back his head, stared long and hard at the Juniper, and announced:

"Just have a look here! They've been praising that engineer to the skies, saying how talented he is, but look what an enormous blunder he's made here! "

"Yes, you're right," said one of his companions, catching up with him.

"True enough," confirmed the second.

But the third did not agree.

"I'm not sure I see what you're talking about."

But the chairman let the comment go by unanswered. As if desiring to convince himself that his supporters really agreed with him, he asked:

"What is the mistake the engineer has made here?"

But the members of the commission could not answer him.

The chairman's face grew dark with anger, and he grumbled:

"A fine bunch of road builders you are! "

But they only smiled in confusion, so the chairman simply called the driver over and sent him to the nearest village for a saw.

He returned in about twenty minutes. The chairman pointed at the Juniper.

"It has to be cut down."

"Yes, you're right. It has to go," agreed two of the members in a single voice.

"But why?" objected the third. "The Juniper isn't hurting anyone."

"So you still haven't understood what the problem is here?" chuckled the chairman. "It may not be bothering anyone now, but it will surely grow bigger, and one day, its branches will be so big, they'll interfere with traffic. Obviously, that engineer didn't plan ahead at all. That's where he's made his mistake. Now do you see?"

"Yes, of course," said the first.

"Quite true," the second assented approvingly.

But the third man still shook his head in objection. However, the chairman did not wait to hear his reason. He turned to the two who agreed with him and ordered them to cut the tree down.

One of them took the saw, walked over to the Big Rock, and had second thoughts. -

"Why don't we just leave it until it actually becomes a

problem," he mumbled.

"What's the matter with you, feeling sorry for a tree! " snapped the chairman, flaring up in anger. "A fine lot you are! "

He took the saw and climbed the Big Rock himself. When it saw the man, the tree trembled, and its leaves rustled pitifully as if it were begging for mercy. But the chairman was implacable. He was proud of the fact that he had found such a major error on the part of the engineer. Now he would be able to inform his superiors of the error and add that the members of the commission were utterly useless, saying that he had even had to cut down the Juniper himself.

The saw bit into the wood. Working up a good sweat, the chairman cut through to the center of one of the biggest and longest branches of the Juniper. It broke and fell with a crack, knocking off a piece of the Big Rock in the process.

Everyone looked involuntarily at the spot the stone had fallen from. Drops of water appeared on the break and began to trickle down the stone, first one, then another, then a third...

But was it only water? Or was it tears they saw? Perhaps the Big Rock was shedding tears of pity for the Juniper... Shocked by the crime committed by this human being with a heart of stone.



And from that day, the Big Rock has been known as the Stone of Tears.

THE MARBLE GIRL



Final exams were in progress at the art school. The senior students were well prepared, could probably answer any and every question, but they were nervous all the same. Even the best students, whose graduation work had already been exhibited and had won the praise of spe-

cialists—even they paced the corridor in worry. Among these was slim, fair-skinned, black-eyed Burkhan Faizullayev of the town of Kulyab.

His father was a potter and Burkhan had early become fascinated with his craft. The father was not merely a skilful craftsman like so many others; people spoke of him as a wizard at his trade. He got his clay from the same cliff everybody else did, but apparently he knew a secret how to moisten and mix it in some special way. Besides, his fingers were long and slender, as if nature had specially fashioned them for this kind of work. As he himself always said, they “itched and smarted without clay”. It was this constant urge to work creatively, multiplied by his innate artistic talent, that constituted, as Burkhan now understood, his father’s chief secret.

Clay would literally come to life in his father’s hands and, as if sensing his tender love, would obediently shape itself into whatever he wished—a bowl, a platter, or a pitcher with a spout, an *oftoba*, as gracefully curved as a swan’s neck. The finished articles, bearing tastefully painted designs, would evoke everyone’s admiration. Some people even took them at first glance for factory-made porcelain rather than hand-made pottery.

Burkhan’s father was especially good at pitchers and vases, and at all kinds of figurines. On the upper shelf of a niche in one of the rooms in their house stood a vase for

flowers which could easily be classed as one of the finest examples of the potter's art. The bottom part was broad, almost round, and the neck narrow, but the transition was so gradual as to be almost imperceptible to the eye, and the grace of the lines was a delight to behold. The father evidently loved this creation of his more than all others. Now and again he would take it in his hands, wipe invisible dust from it, and snap his fingers against it, taking pleasure in its pure, crystal-like ring.

When Burkhan entered an art school and came to know the masterpieces of all times and nations, he saw a reproduction of Hans Holbein's *Portrait of the Hanseatic Merchant Georg Gisze* painted more than four centuries earlier. He almost cried out in astonishment at it: before the merchant stood a vase very like his father's. Only his father's was of clay and painted with a flower pattern, while this one was of glass or, more likely, of crystal. And in his mind he again heard his father saying:

"Remember, son, there's a lot you must see and learn."

Burkhan could never forget that conversation. His one ambition having been to learn his father's craft, he had attended school reluctantly at first, regarding it as a tiresome obligation. All the time he kept thinking of his father's workshop and the whirling potter's wheel on which a lump of golden-hued clay magically turned into such customary and yet such beautiful objects. The process of their birth was a mystery he wanted to fathom, and day-dreaming about it was so much more interesting than learning arithmetic or the parts of speech.

But at supper one evening his father had said:

"I've looked through your notebooks and your report card. I went to school and spoke to your teacher. He complains about you, says you're inattentive. If you don't study well you can forget about being a potter because nowadays you can't even hope to make bricks without having knowledge. Remember, son, there's a lot you must see and learn before you can become a master craftsman. My father, who was also a potter, studied at a Bukhara madrassah. If you want to follow in our footsteps you must first finish school and then go to college in Dushanbe."

Burkhan was amazed. Could that be true? To become a potter one had, in the old days, to attend a madrassah, and now finish a college? He almost put the question to his father but caught himself in time. A father's word was law.

And so, suppressing a sigh, he made to rise from the table to do his homework, but his father stopped him with a reproof.

"A well-mannered boy does not sit down to table before the grown-ups do, and on finishing a meal he does not rise without their permission. Remember that."

From then on Burkhan applied himself to his studies. He became interested in them and finished school with a gold medal, but his desire to master his father's craft remained as strong as ever, and his father was glad and proud to see that it was so. On the day his son received his school-leaving certificate he called him into his workshop, sat him down in his chair, and said:

"Now, my young lion, here's clay, here's the wheel, make whatever you like. Let's see what you're capable of."

"Whatever I like?"

"Yes, anything you like."

"I saw a picture in a magazine of a lovely thing some Czech glass-blowers made. If you permit, I'll try to copy it."

"All right," agreed his father, and only then asked: "What sort of thing?"

"A fruit bowl."

"Fine, go ahead."

Burkhan set to work. So as not to embarrass him his father occupied himself with some work at a distance, but every now and then took a peek at him. "I wonder what sort of bowl he'll make," he mused. "Now that looks like a dish turned upside down; I suppose it's the base. Why is he drawing out the clay? He's twisting it like a rope, braiding it. Ah, now I see..."

After setting the twisted stem on the base, like a candle, and setting that aside, Burkhan made the bowl proper, a round, rather deep, delicate shell.

"Hmm, not bad for a first try. Not bad at all," thought the father and gave a sigh of relief.

"I also made a bowl like that once; the boss took it from me. Only it didn't have a twisted stem like yours. Well, what paints shall I mix for you?"

"I'll do it all myself."

"Fine, son! You'll find all the paints you want, and any amount of patterns to choose from."

"What if I invent my own?"

"Go ahead and try," smiled his father. "But can't I help you with anything?"

"With the glazing," said Burkhan.

The painted design also won the father's praise. Not that Burkhan had thought up anything new; he'd merely adorned the bowl with wild flowers and the figures of birds. But the vivid, fresh colours, and the delicacy of the colour scheme were a joy to behold.

"Yes, you'll make a good potter," said the father, clapping Burkhan on the shoulder, and added with a smile: "After graduating from college."

"What if..." began Burkhan and paused, uncertain whether to speak out or not, but then continued: "An exhibition of folk art is opening in Dushanbe. Rugs, tapestries, pottery, paintings, sculpture and metal-work will be shown. How about our submitting your vase ... and this bowl?" He raised his eyes. "I'm going there anyhow to enter college. If you agree, I'll take them with me."

"Sure people won't laugh at us, won't sneer at our submitting such things?" the father asked, and added with a smile: "All right, nothing venture, nothing have. Take them along."

Thus did the work of two Kulyab potters, father and son, come to be displayed at a large-scale exhibition, and there was not a visitor but paused to admire them.

One day a lanky, bespectacled elderly man with a moustache and short pointed beard visited the exhibition. After spending a long time admiring the vases, he asked the keeper's permission to handle them. He marvelled at their light weight and melodious ring, but what he liked most was the painted design.

"Charming! Splendid! Exquisite!" he kept exclaiming. "Could you tell me where Burkhan Faizullayev is now? How can I get in touch with him? Would you please give him this note with my address?"

"Certainly, certainly, I'll be glad to. He comes here quite often. A modest, well-mannered young man. Talented."

"Yes, a natural talent. Please don't forget to give him my address."

"Don't worry, Alexander Alexandrovich, I won't forget."

Two days later Burkhan knocked at the gate of a house on Nizami Street. The sculptor Alexander Alexandrovich Bardin opened it himself and when Burkhan introduced himself, seized him by the hand, drew him into the house, showered him with questions and then examined the album of sketches and drawings the young man had brought with him.

"Oh-ho, so you also paint?! Hm, not bad at all... Good ...

very good ... simply charming. From the pedagogical point of view, this may be wrong or premature, but I must tell you, my dear young man, you have talent. Yes, yes, beyond all question! Art is definitely your calling. You must enter our art school. How did you finish secondary school? With a gold medal? Bravo! Hurry and hand in your application. I'll present you at the school myself. If you require the consent of your parents, I'll call on them."

Burkhan was entranced by Bardin and took his advice. On that same day he wrote to his father and withdrew his application from the polytechnical institute. He passed the exams to the art school, began to study sculpture under Bardin and soon became one of his best students.

Four years passed and now Burkhan was nervously pacing the long, multi-windowed corridor of the school, worrying about what the examination commission would think of his graduation work—the statue of a girl carved of white marble.

He had gone to the quarry and chosen the slab himself. And he had had a model, though she had never suspected the fact. He travelled to school in a bus, and every morning, at the next stop, there got onto the bus a girl slender as a reed, with short-cropped blond hair, a high, clear forehead and big, bright, sky-blue eyes set in a round rosy face. Everything about the girl was winsome and harmonious; she had a freshness suggestive of wild spring flowers.

Nearly always the girl had to push onto the step of the overcrowded bus and cling precariously to the metal door-handle with long, slender fingers as rosy as a child's.

On pushing his way out Burkhan would politely ask those in front of him, including the girl, whether they were getting off. "No," the girl would answer briefly and squeeze herself tight to let him pass.

Those morning meetings made them acquainted, as it were, and sometimes they would automatically greet each other. One morning, as Burkhan was getting off the bus, he thought he heard the girl say "see you tomorrow", and saw a gentle smile fleet across her lips. The soft pink of her cheeks reminded him of a spring sunrise in the mountains. That day Burkhan decided to paint her portrait. He would call it "Spring Dawn". The girl seemed more beautiful to him than Venus or Aurora.

A trolleybus, and an overcrowded one at that, is no place for sketching. Burkhan began covertly to study the girl's features so as to impress them on his memory, and then, in

his hostel, to reproduce them on paper. He took his time about it. What he aimed for was not merely to reproduce the original—that was easy enough—but to convey the dewy freshness and charm that had impressed him so deeply. He wanted the future viewer of the portrait to sense, as he did, the gentle coolness of a spring morning and the delicate fragrance of wild spring flowers.

At last the portrait was finished. Burkhan decided to wake earlier the next morning, walk to the stop where the girl always got on and conceal himself somewhere there to compare his portrait with the original. But that morning the girl failed to appear. Nor did she appear on the morrow or on any of the next few days. He imagined she had probably got fed up with the crowded trolleybuses and began to take an autobus instead. But no, that proved not the case.

Burkhan thereupon took to walking to school and back every day, making detours into all the streets and lanes in the vicinity of her stop, looking in at all the shops on the way, but nowhere did he sight the girl who was more beautiful than Venus or Aurora. She had vanished like a dream, faded away like the morning mist, melted into thin air. Burkhan was beside himself.

*He who has loved so truly
That all his strength has failed
Himself engenders true love
And is himself its child.**

From then on all his thoughts centred on the girl. Her image was ever with him, as that of his father at work at his wheel had been in his childhood. He studied his drawing and felt it did not convey even an inkling of the pure beauty of this girl who had in truth appeared to him, in the poet's words, like "a vision fair and fleeting".

"Take note, observe, and pass what you see through your heart," Bardin always enjoined. "It's not a matter of recording things that you see, but of expressing the emotions they arouse in you. Fall in love with them so that your heart flutters and the words 'I remember the wondrous moment' ring in your heart like music, and then you'll stir the hearts of others."

There were few who would not have been stirred by Bur-

* The verse is by Jami (1414-1494), classic of Persian poetry.—
Translated by Alex Miller.

khan's portrait of the girl, but he himself was not satisfied, it seemed to him he failed to express his feelings fully. He had a growing desire to start a new portrait, this one in marble. He recalled the girl's delicate hands, the purity of her features, the whiteness of her long, gracefully curved neck, and thought:

"They have to be carved of marble ... paints are too crude and gaudy for them."

He showed his sketches for the future statue to Bardin, and the latter, hiding a smile, asked:

"What will you call it? 'A Modern Aphrodite'?" Burkhan blushed.

" 'The Marble Girl', " he replied in a barely audible voice.

"Hmm, hmm," murmured Bardin, pushing his glasses up on his forehead. "Is she to be calm and passionless?"

"No."

"Aha, no! So then there will be movement and life in her? Eagerness? Passion?"

Burkhan was silent.

"Your statue should be a representation of youth. 'Youth', that will be your theme. Don't forget that this will be your graduation work. But don't go back on your vision." Bardin smiled and recited his favourite line from Pushkin:

*"O wondrous moment! There before me
A radiant, fleeting dream, you stood..."*

Burkhan worked nearly five months to put his love and his dream into marble, and never noticed how night followed day, how the days flew. The statue came out well; those who saw it praised it. Some even said it would be a credit to any exhibition.

But at this crucial time the sternest judge of all his work, his strict, demanding teacher and kind mentor, whose opinion Burkhan valued most and whose word he considered as final as a verdict, was absent. On returning from an assignment abroad, Bardin had fallen ill and been laid up in a Moscow hospital. True, the director of the school had said that he had already been discharged and could be expected back any day now. But he had not arrived on the day before the diploma on either the morning or evening flights, and today Burkhan faced his final examination. The fact that he had to present his work without its first having been seen and approved by Bardin filled him with dismay.

Tired at last of pacing the corridor, Burkhan stopped at a

window and stood staring out into the street. Suddenly his heart skipped a beat. He could hardly believe his eyes.

"My God! Can it be?! " he cried out.

"What? What is it?" his classmates crowded around him.

"Look, the man paying off a taxi. It's Bardin! "

"Yes, yes, it's him! "

"What a nice surprise! "

"Listen, he's come here straight from the airport! " cried one student, shouting the others.

All of them started running to meet Bardin but at that moment the door of the auditorium opened and a woman stuck out her head and pronounced in solemn tones:

"Burkhan Faizullayev."

Burkhan's knees shook, he broke into a cold sweat. He walked into the auditorium feeling a heavy weight on his heart, but within ten minutes he came bounding out all aglow ... and fell straight into Bardin's arms.

"I can see you've passed with flying colours. Congratulations. I've always had faith in you. What a pity we can't disturb the commission." Bardin looked at his watch. "Never mind, not long now till the recess. Come, my friends, let's sit down, the time will pass more quickly in conversation."

The students crowded around him, all of them glad to see him. For each he had a kind word. Those who still had their exams to take he encouraged with witty banter so that the corridor rang with laughter.

"Sh, sh," he warned with a finger to his lips, "let's not disturb the high commission and our colleagues."

He sat Burkhan down beside him and waited impatiently for the moment when he would be able to see his statue. Burkhan was just as impatient.

"You've lost weight, my dear young man," commented Bardin. "Been working hard?"

"Rather."

"Of course, final exams ... plus emotional stress, noble suffering."

"As always before exams."

"Only the exams?" smiled Bardin putting his arm around Burkhan's shoulders. Fortunately, at that moment the commission members trooped out of the auditorium and immediately surrounded Bardin. Burkhan stepped aside and he thought with a sigh, "You don't know the half of it. You've guessed that I'm in love, but neither you nor anybody

else will ever know how hopeless my love is." As it turned out, however, this was not quite so.

At first sight of Burkhan's marble girl Bardin exclaimed heartily: "Bravo! "

He circled around the statue, examining it from every possible angle, and expressing his delight at its plasticity, at the grace and vitality of the figure. The ancient Greeks, he remarked with a chuckle, had been ever so right to affirm in their myths that it's love that makes the world go round.

"So that's why she fell ill! You exhausted her!" he exclaimed. "Whom?"

"Don't play dumb! Valya, of course."

"What Valya?"

Bardin grinned: "Now, now, young man, you may be sure I can recognise my granddaughter's friend, whom I've known since she was an infant."

"But I ... I..."

Burkhan's voice shook treacherously and now it was Bardin who was astonished. Taking Burkhan by the arm, he sat him down on a chair and seated himself opposite him.

"All right, tell me about it."

Burkhan was confused. He could hardly collect his thoughts. Somehow he suddenly could not quite believe that his marble girl really existed and that now he was certain to meet her. He told his teacher how the idea of making the statue had come to him but spoke no word of his feelings. Why explain what is self-evident?

Bardin kept his twinkling eyes fixed on him.

"Valya was ill, something was wrong with her spine," he told Burkhan, "but now she's well and will soon be riding the trolleybus again. But you and I, my young friend, will see her today. Yes, yes, tonight. It's Valya's birthday. You'll bring her her portrait as a present and invite her to see what she looks like in marble. Agreed?"

Burkhan nodded. His cheeks burned.





THE FOWLER

The long-awaited time had come: the brood was leaving the nest. Under the watchful eyes of their parents, the fledglings were starting to take wing.

He would go high into the mountains, catch tiny chicks, bring them home, and put them in cages. He was a true

fowler, but hunted only partridges. He especially loved these birds for their subdued but elegant plumage and for their lovely singing.

At this time of year, his yard resembled a bird market. There were rows of cages with red-beaked chicks. He would walk around with a satisfied air, carefully looking after them. He would catch them grass-hoppers on the verdant slopes of the hills. As soon as he lowered the insects into the cages, the hungry partridge chicks would open their mouths wide, each hoping to get a piece of the tasty prey for itself. The lucky ones who managed to get a large bit would throw their heads back, stubbornly refusing to share their prize with the others. The chicks grew from day to day, often taking offense at each other and fighting. They got so big, it was too crowded for them in the cages. Then the fowler would put the strongest and most pugnacious birds into separate cages. The weaker ones he would give to his relatives and friends.

The fowler was especially fond of one particularly hardy cock with spurs, short, stocky legs like an eagle's, and a strong, straight beak. Its compact body reminded the fowler of a smooth river stone. This was a fine partridge, a bird that would always fight to the last. When it tired, it would open its beak wide and breathe heavily until the owner chased it back into its cage. Beau, as the fowler had named him lovingly and not without a touch of irony, could sing all day long. But how would

he perform his solo role as a decoy during the hunt?

The fowler began setting out his traps the week before the Islamic New Year, celebrated at the spring equinox. He would head for the hills towards evening with a partridge in a cage strapped to his back, the hem of his robe tucked under his belt, and a ball of string for snares, a knife, and a bundle of wooden pegs in his hands.

Early in the morning, he would begin setting out the snares. First he would choose a place for the cage, then hammer a peg into the ground next to it. He would attach the end of the snare to the peg and unwind the entire ball in loops, fastening each noose to the ground with a peg. When the trap was set, it formed a huge circle. The blue loops of the nooses hung slightly above the grass and low bushes. The fowler camouflaged the partridge cage which stood in the center of the snares and then hid in the bushes. If the decoy partridge were silent, the fowler would encourage it: "Sing a song for me, my little lure! Everything's ready, so you can call your friends now. Sing a bit more gaily! Look lively now! "

Lost in the sweet pain of expectation, he would unwittingly place his tongue against his upper palate and mimic the cry of a partridge hen. Or, shifting the tip of his tongue slightly to the left, he could imitate a cock. The hostage in the cage would answer, and burst into frenzied song.

But this time, he had rushed things a bit. The fowler shushed Beau, and he stopped singing. After a while, from a distant ravine came the call of a partridge. There was a clear reply from somewhere below and to the left near a rushing river. Another bird was somewhere about.

The sun was breaking across the mountain tops, and with it rose the cries of the birds, merging into a huge, festive mating choir. The hens would rush headlong towards the call of the cocks, clucking so loudly that the echoes sounded far into the distance. Sometimes the fowler would see a hen rush forward in answer to Beau's call, forgetting all else and throwing caution to the wind. The hen would be caught in one of the snares and begin frantically flapping her wings. Then the fowler would creep out of his hiding place, coughing first so he wouldn't frighten Beau, free the ill-fated prisoner from her noose, and stick the bird under his shirt. He would reset the snares and conceal himself once more.

But when brooding time came, the fowler would take a

hen as a decoy. The cocks were exceptionally excitable and pugnacious at that time of year. They would rush toward the inviting call, with their heads lowered and the feathers on their trembling necks puffed up. Their eyes would grow dazed and cloudy. At such times, it was all the fowler could do to keep the snares untangled.

All the same, the fowler preferred to hunt with Beau, who could lure even the most cautious birds into the snare. In winter, the fowler would feed Beau raisins, soaked peas and crushed walnuts, and give him fresh water. When spring came, he would go to the mountains for the stalks of plants which, although poisonous to humans, were the favorite delicacy of partridges for some strange reason. He would catch spiders for Beau and gather snowdrops and dandelion roots for him on the hillsides.

He even made a cassette tape of his darling's song. He specially liked the part where Beau cawed like a crow, which he did to calm his kinsmen. Whenever guests came over to visit, the fowler would inconspicuously turn on the cassette player, and his home would be filled with the partridge's cries.

The next season, having taught Beau not to fear the sound of gunshots, the hunter no longer bothered laying snares. He was a crack-shot, and sometimes he would bring down rare double-spurred specimens with his fowling piece.

One day, the fowler hung Beau's cage on the branch of a juniper and went to hide in the hollow of a tree nearby. After a night of rain, the sky had cleared, but huge drops were still falling from the branches. Cocking his head to one side, Beau listened for a while, then pecked at the empty feeder and quietly began to sing. He was answered immediately. A plump hen flew up and alighted on a boulder. The hunter took aim, but the hen was still too far away.

Beau was singing ecstatically, jumping up and down in his cage. It seemed as though all the branches, the trees, and the very morning had burst into song. The hen flitted closer, but was hidden by a sweetbriar.

Suddenly a shot rang out. The hen flew away, and the hunter stared at his gun in bewilderment. Then he looked with horror at the blood-covered Beau, frantically beating his wings in the cage. He ran toward his decoy, but suddenly he heard someone coming through the bushes. He slowly lifted his rifle and took aim at the head of the approaching

stranger. But his hands trembled and the barrel of the gun jerked up. A shot rang out, and the stranger stopped dead in his tracks, screaming.

"The devil take you!" the fowler shouted angrily, running out from behind the bushes. "Are you out of your mind?"

The man who had shot Beau shuffled his feet uneasily.

"Ah, well, you see... I didn't see the cage."

"What the hell's the matter with you? Are you blind, or what?"

"You can't see the wire of the cage at all from a distance," offered the hapless marksman in justification. "I'll give you another partridge no worse than this one!"

"The hell with your partridges! There's not another cock like this one anywhere..."

The fowler took the cage off the branch, opened it, and gently lifted Beau out. The bird's body had already grown cold. He held the dead bird in the palm of his hand, stroking it pensively. Suddenly, he threw the lifeless partridge viciously at the stranger's feet.

"Here, take your trophy!"

"No, no. I couldn't really. Why I wouldn't even think of it... I swear!"

But the hunter just tossed the cage into the bushes and slowly walked off in the direction of the village. It was the first time he had returned empty-handed.

He went home and switched on the cassette player. Once again he heard Beau singing his heart out, pouring forth his sweet melodies. Tears trickled down the fowler's face.

He mourned for seven days, then took the cassette player and headed for the mountains. He cleared a space under the mountain pine, set up the cassette player, and turned it on. His darling Beau began to sing his never-ending song. But in the pauses, there reigned a terrible silence.



TIMUR ZULFIKAROV

HODJA NASREDDIN'S
DREAMS OF QUINCE

(An excerpt from the novella
Hodja Nasreddin's First Love)



*...Everything in life
is subject to change.
Only Great Wisdom and Great
Stupidity remain the same...*

Confucius

...Whee! I'm flying! Whee! Hey, hey everybody, look at me! I'm flying, I'm flying! Oh, mountain dwellers of the village, oh, distant valley people, look, I'm flying! Whee! I'm flying above the village and smokey, chill, autumn fields! To the bitter, empty fields... I'm flying mute with awe, flying through the quince trees! Flying, but I have to close my eyes for fear the branches will blind me. The branches of the quince tree—heavy, ripe, pregnant with the sweet, succulent golden fruit of the quince trees. I fear the branches will pierce my eyes, my eyelashes, my eyelids. But the branches do not hurt my face; they only caress it... And the fruits, like golden spheres, silently slip off their branches... The silent, tender, shy branches which cling to my face... Stroking it... Caressing my strong, gaunt, dewy young face... Which is all aglow.

On, Mother, my dear old mother, *Liapak-bibi*, is that you? Are those your hands? Again, Mother? I don't want to, Mother! I don't want to! Is it branches? Branches? Am I flying? No, I'm not asleep. *Liapak-bibi*, take your branch-arms away...

I'm flying. Swiftly, silently. Gliding through the trees...

Mother, my old one, your hands are so dry and wasted, so earthy and sallow... Mother! You are like a withered tree. Mother, I love you. Mother, don't ever die. Don't leave me.

Hold my head in your hands. Don't let go; hold me in your branch-arms... Don't let them fall...

At the edge of the village stands a withered old tree... The ancient Chinese elm tree. A teeming army of ants swarms all through the tree. By day and by night. The ants are ceaselessly astir! By sunlight and by moonlight... But the tree stands mute. Because it is all dried up; it has spent itself. It is dead. And that is why the countless legions of ants are ceaselessly astir, teeming along their paths.

Mother, the ants swarm, crawl, flow along your arms, and you do not shake them off or kill them, but only stand there smiling at me, caressing my face with your gentle fingers...

Mother, do not die, do not wither... My old one... You gave birth to me too late, created me too late... My dear old one... You are my ancient elm with throngs of ants teeming with life... You gave birth to me too late... All the other fledglings have already flown away, but I have just fallen from the nest... I am still a fledgling, a fledgling that fell out of the nest too late. I left the nest too late... All your fledglings have flown away, my mother, my withered elm, my wasted elm of the ant paths... My beloved dear one...

But!

I'm flying above the golden quince trees... Above the dried-up, ancient elm at the edge of the village...

I'm flying, I'm flying, Mother! Whee! I'm flying...

"Son, son, wake up! Shh, quiet. You'll wake the neighbors. Enough flying around. Come down to earth. Wake up... The dawn is breaking... It's time to go to the mountain pass to fetch wood. Wake up, son... You've flown around enough for one night. Son, get up... Wake up, Nasreddin..."

"Oh, Mother, let me sleep a bit longer... I'm flying, soaring like a bird through the distant, dim, golden quince orchards! The golden, rich quince fruits are falling... There

they are! .. And I'm a bird, giddy from trying my first wings! Intoxicated by the falling fruit... Mother, I'm a bird... I'm flying! Whee-e-e-e... A bird! Fly-y-y-ying! "

"You're not a bird. You're a young lad. You're already sixteen, Nasreddin. The time has come to find you a wife. Otherwise, you'll be flying around every night! You'll grow thin and exhaust yourself with these dreams. You've come of age... That's why you're always flying around in your sleep, knocking the fruit off its branches. You've started having the golden quince dreams. The dreams of golden quince have begun to visit you, and they won't leave you until you fall in love..."

So says Nasreddin's father, Mustapha-bobo. He, too, is old. He, too, resembles the ants' Chinese elm at the edge of the village... A thin trickle of saliva was running from Nasreddin's mouth onto the narrow, flat pillow. Upon hearing his father's words, the boy immediately woke up, and, throwing off the threadbare covers, jumped out of bed. He rubbed his sleepy eyes with his long, thin fingers... The chill autumn morning air made him shiver. He felt sad that the dreams of golden quince were fading away... Fading... Gone...

"Sheikh Saadi was once asked: when does one reach manhood? And he answered: the ancient books speak of three signs of manhood—first, reaching the age of fifteen. Second, passionate dreams at night. And third, the growing of hair under the armpits..."

Nasreddin blushed profusely at Mustapha-bobo's words, sighed, and quietly answered:

"The sheikh was right. All three signs have come upon me. But there is a fourth one, *ata*... Quince orchards. All golden. With a bird hovering in the branches. A clinging, sweet bird up in the tree among the sticky, sweet fruit... A quince bird hovering in the quince trees... Herself golden in the golden orchard, among the fruit..."

"Golden orchards and gardens come under passionate dreams, my son. There are no such gardens on this earth..."

They're there... Up above... The Prophet has spoken of them: those who believe and do good deeds will enter the Garden of Paradise... The Garden of Eden will open its gates to the faithful. There, they will find peace and rest at the Source, and will call for all manner of refreshment..."

"Who will wait on them? Servants? Are there servants in Paradise, too?"

"People have to serve and help each other, my son..."

"Mother, give me some *airan*-soured milk and pita bread with cream."

"There, you see. You are asking your mother to serve you... Allah is right, Allah is great. You must love him."

"I love *airan*. And now, I'm off to fetch wood. Give me the sack and the axe..."

...And our donkey al-Yahshur is also old. I feel so sorry for him. His legs quiver with old age, and his coat has grown as thin as the transparent grass of autumn. His bald legs...

I do not ride the donkey, but walk alongside him. I pity my poor old brother, even if he is only a donkey... I pity his weak, shaking bald legs. Soon, the hordes of ants will crawl on them, too, harbingers of death... And why do I keep staring at his legs? Why can't I look away? The dazzling, clear autumn-bird of morning has taken wing and soars all around me, rejoicing, and exultant, but I can only stare at these old donkey legs. And the donkey's eyes are rheumy, sorrowful, heavy, sad... So why do I keep thinking about these spindly, trembling legs and sad eyes? Why?..

"He whose soul is too sensitive, too kind, too vulnerable, is not long for this world. Such a person grows weary. Cannot endure this life. Or else, falls prey to the strong and evil..."

So says my father.

I recall his words and try to forget about the donkey's eyes and legs. I look up at the sky. The clear, early-morning, autumn sky. So lonely and dull... Cold autumn sky of the cold autumn birds...

But!

The golden, silent quince bird clings to the golden,
viscous, fragrant, late harvest fruits which have already been
pierced by the evening chill of autumn.

The bird clings... Silent... All aglow...

The fiery bird!

Yes!

MAHMUD TALGAT—BEK

*...And the falcons caught those
whom they caught, and missed
those whom they missed.*

Ussama ibn Munkyz

A gentle early-morning mist hung over the mountain pass.
A small, crystal-clear river rushed over the rocks. Here lay
the gorge of the plane trees—the strong, mighty plane trees
which rose majestically among the rocks in the middle of
the river. Even though it was already autumn, the leaves of
these mountain plane trees were still green. Still green
although the orchards of the valleys had already turned
bright colors, lost their leaves, and stood barren and empty...

There below, in the valley's orchards and forests, the fat-
tened autumn hares and red foxes scour the land in search
of food... Red autumn hares and foxes... But here, the fresh,
cool, lush green of the river plane trees... How I love this
mountain pass. I know and love every rock, every tree, and
every animal here. Living hidden and obscure...

And I know that the rocks and trees love me, too... They
recognize me as one of their own and sense my presence
among them...

When I die, I want to become a rock or a tree in this
mountain pass... Or an animal, but not a beast of prey...
Better to be an autumn hare than a fox...

This mountain pass is my cradle, my crib, my life-source...
It is here in the rocky river that I fish for trout. The khan's,
lithe, glistening trout.

My father says:

"Be as pure, my son, as these trout from the crystal stream.
Live among pure people as the trout live in the pure waters..."

But where are these pure waters, these pure trout, these pure people?

...The old donkey al-Yahshur drank of the icy-cold spring water.

Young Nasreddin began chopping the dried trees which stood along the river bank, poplars and white willow, slicing the air with firm strokes of the gleaming axe. Nasreddin, the adroit, accurate, quick adolescent. Beads of sweat trickled slowly down his round face into the crystal water...

Oh, my beloved mountain pass. Winding, morning-fresh, alive... When I die, I want to be one of your rocks, trees, or creatures...

To stand here motionless; forever... To live here... To breathe and smell the chill, fragrant autumn breeze...

But even the plane trees wither and perish; even the rocks are worn away by the wind; even the animals die...

All the same, it's better to be a human being... After all, a plane tree is only a plane tree; a rock is but a rock, and an animal but an animal... But a human being encompasses them all.

It is written by Sheikh Rumi:

Nothing lies outside of you...

Everything you seek is to be found within you...

And it is written in the Holy Book: "You already possess everything you need, but you are not aware of it! "

So why must people die? Why is my mother, my meek, humble Liapak-bibi so old? Why?

And my father, Mustapha-ata, my innocent, toothless potter with the thin gray beard—why is he old? Why?

Why are al-Yahshur's legs hairless and trembling, so limp, transparent, and brittle? Why?

Why do the ants, harbingers of death, swarm and crowd and overrun everything?

Why? Why? Why, oh, why?..

The punishment is not in proportion to the crime... Besides, what crime has there been?

Why? Why is there death?

Ouch!

The blind axe struck Nasreddin's foot and hit upon his father's worn-out boot, the boot Nasreddin was wearing.

Tears streamed down Nasreddin's face. Only this time, they were tears of pain. But then, he suddenly burst out laughing, hopping up and down on one foot...

"Hey, al-Yahshur, see that? See how as soon as I start thinking about eternity and immortality, Allah punishes me right on the spot... Only the rich can afford to ponder such questions, but the poor have no business thinking about such things... The poor are devoured by time... The way a spider devours a fly... I dared to think about eternity for but a brief moment, and almost lost my poor, all too mortal foot! Ha-ha! ... If I had chopped off my foot, I would have had to do as the holy dervish Kalandar Devonai Burkhu did—stand on one foot for forty years as a sign of protest to Allah for having created hell! And what was his reward? The sinners themselves stoned him to death! That only goes to show that you shouldn't be so quick to defend sinners. Let them go their own merry way—straight to hell. Right, little donkey? You shouldn't stand in their way. For that matter, you shouldn't meddle in anyone's business... Especially down there in hell... Because sometimes an imaginary hell rises up from the depths and comes to Earth, and then, it becomes all too real... Then, indeed, what is there to do but stand proudly on one foot as a sign of protest."

Pain loosens your tongue. A wise man is not talkative, for it is said that "...he who speaks, does not know; he who knows, does not speak..."

So Nasreddin stopped talking, took off the ruined boot which had saved his foot, and tossed it into the river.

The shoe floated swiftly down the misty river and disappeared around the bend.

Suddenly, Nasreddin heard a fierce, drunken scream nearby! "Aoow! "

The scream resembled the shrill, blind shrieks of the wandering Sufi-dervishes, intoxicated by hashish, whirling in their ecstatic, frenzied dances.

Wearing only one boot, Nasreddin started running along the soft sand of the riverbank in the direction of the scream, leaving in his wake patchwork tracks of barefoot, one boot, barefoot, one boot...

Who could it be, shouting so fiercely in the early-morning haze of the mountain pass? The voice, full of fear, begged:

"Aooow! Someone help! I'm dying! The evil Albasty spirit is strangling me to death! ... Help me! Somebody help! "

Nasreddin ran out onto the narrow sandbar and saw a gray-bearded old man dressed in a short hunting-jacket embroidered in silver and belted at the waist with a wide red sash. On his feet, he wore high Sassanid hunting boots. The old man was screaming, twisting, and hopping up and down on one foot on a wet, slippery rock like a frisky, cavorting mountain goat.

Nasreddin saw the snake immediately. It was an Indian King Cobra. The snake had wound itself lithely and tightly about the old man's leg. Its sacred, swollen, magnificent hooded head, rocking and swaying from the old man's frantic, demented leaps and hops...

"A cobra usually strikes right away... Why has this one wrapped itself around the old man's leg? Strange! "

But the King Cobra swayed rhythmically to and fro, its head weaving in front of the old man's face, ready to strike at any moment. The old man was desperately trying to escape the deadly snake's tooth.

"Help! Help! I'm going to die! The Albasty spirit is killing me! It's strangling me! It wants to devour me! "

Nasreddin ran up to the howling, raving old man, and in a soothing voice, said:

"Sh-h-h! Oh, Brother Cobra, my dear friend! Now, now! Look at me now... Do you recognize me? It's Nasreddin... Now, now... Be calm... Come here, my lovely," and

Nasreddin hypnotically, gracefully waved his hand in front of the snake's head, luring its attention away from the old man who now stood frozen with fear. The cobra's head. Blind. Lightning-fast. Deadly...

But Nasreddin's hand was also quick. He grabbed the cobra at the base of its hood... Then, with both hands, he began to squeeze. The snake grew drowsy... And fell asleep... The splendid, puffed-up hood grew limp in his hands. Its taut, rustling, skin so like that of the quince...

Nasreddin untangled and freed the old man's leg... Slowly, because the snake's long tail was thrashing at his face... Taut, thrashing, violent, firm...

But finally, the wearied head, defeated, blissfully drifted off to sleep in Nasreddin's strong grasp.

Nasreddin dragged the snake away from the old man.

"Don't be afraid, *domullo*. Apparently the snake took you for a dried tree stump... Otherwise, it would have bitten you immediately."

"Yes, I'm old... I do resemble a tree stump indeed... But now, kill the snake. Strangle it!" the old man shouted hoarsely. "It's the Albasty spirit which has been after me a long time..."

"No, *domullo*... The Albasty is a dwarf with long golden hair. She lives in deserted cities that have been buried in the embrace of the sleepy sands... In abandoned nomad's tents and forgotten tombs... This is but a cobra... A King Cobra, and I love it... It is kind!"

"Kill it! I order you to kill it! I command you!"

"No, I cannot!"

"Why?"

"Because it is we who have trespassed on its domain, so to kill it would not be fair. If this snake had crawled into our home, that would have been a different matter: then we would have had to kill it. But this is its home and its mountain pass. We are its guests... Does a guest kill his host?"

Nasreddin ran off a few steps, put the snake down on the sand, and walked away. The cobra started coming to... Moving its head, awakening, coming back to life...

And then it silently slithered away and disappeared among the rocks, leaving only a faint winding trail on the sand...

"You're quite a clever boy. Where are you from? Who are you? And what are you doing on my land?"

"I'm Nasreddin from the village of Old Plane Tree. I'm the potter Mustapha-*ata*'s son..."

"Do you recognize me?"

Of course, I recognized him right away—Mahmud Talgat-bek. Half the region belonged to him—this mountain pass, my cradle, my crib... And the trout... And the cobra... And the plane trees... But I had only my old donkey al-Yahshur. Why was that so?

"When you were running and screaming, I did not recognize you, *domullo*... But now I see that it is you, our most revered Talgat-bek..."

"You have a sharp tongue, boy, like the cobra's tooth. First you save me from the cobra, and now, you yourself start biting... But I forgive you... You rescued me from the jaws of death, from the Albasty... We were hunting a Turanian tiger in the marsh, but he swam across the river like a fish, and ran off into the reeds. I got separated from the others, and now my hunting party is probably scouring the woods for me... There—hear the dogs and the drums—they're coming for me..."

And, indeed, I became aware of the fast, hollow, anxious beating of the hunting drums and the barking of the squat, steppe wolfhounds. And then, the bek's hunting party appeared from the bushes astride fine Lokai horses—tireless, relentless, mean hunters. At the head of the party rode the fierce Atabek Kara-Buton... His darting yellow fox-eyes flashed at me... Two falcon-like arrows... Cold and piercing!

It is said by Ussam ibn Munkyz: "...and the falcons caught those whom they caught, and missed those whom they missed..."

The hunt had been unsuccessful, in vain. The drums had beat in vain, waking the innocent, untouched morning mountain pass. In vain had the Lokai horses galloped and searched... In vain.

In vain had the squat wolfhounds nuzzled, scenting for tracks... In vain.

And in vain had Kara-Buton's deadly batik-spear been held in his hands, lying in wait... In vain.

And it did not fly; it did not slice through the air hitting its mark—some poor hunted beast. The retreating, wounded, bleeding prey... It had all been in vain!

And the tiger had escaped, had swum away like a fish across the river into the lush reeds... Into the shelter and safety of the dense reeds! Had swum away like a fish...

Allah be praised!

Nasreddin smiled...

Talgat-bek saw and understood. He shouted at the boy:

"The hunt has been a failure. No blood! I'll trade my Lokai horses for swift Khafadji horses from the scorching desert. I'll get fierce, spirited, meat-eating horses who attack even wolves! And I'll get rid of these deaf-and-dumb steppe mongrels and get keen-nosed bloodhounds... And instead of those hollow Khorezm drums, I'll have ear-splitting Turkish drums! And I'll get rid of you, Atabek Kara-Buton! I'll replace you, too! Oyez! And that tiger swam away across the river like a fish! He got away from us! Oyez! How I crave blood. Do you hear me? I wanted that tiger's blood, but where is he? Escaped into the reeds? Yes?! Gone! "

Talgat-bek sat down on a river boulder. The old man was frothing at the mouth like one of his Lokai horses, and his eyes grew as pale as the milky clouds of May.

"I want and crave hot, violent, young blood! And it's gotten away, escaped into the reeds! Oyez! It's all the Albasty spirit's fault. She's always lying in wait for me. I've only a short time on this earth. As the ancient Chinese sage said: 'The time has come for the lute string to snap! ' Yes! And the drumskins are old, too. Stretched out and

sagging like my own skin... Yes! And that's why I want fresh young blood! But it's run off into the reeds! Why? I wanted blood, but now it's gone..."

"The old crave young blood as though it could warm their own sluggish autumn blood... They are like chickens who cluck and flap their flightless, dung-soiled wings when they feel the high-soaring migratory birds flying past above them... Oh, honored Bek, do you not remember the words of the Herat wiseman, Sheikh Unsuri: 'I was living here on Earth when unexpectedly, Azrael, the Angel of Death, began beating the drums of passage to the other world. But I had not gathered provisions... Had not done good deeds... But still, it is not too late. Why gallop towards the city of evil astride two horses? Still it is not too late... Even on one's deathbed, one can do good deeds.' There is still time before they carry you on your funeral bier. Do you truly want the sole happiness of those around you to be your death, oh honored Mahmud Talgat-bek of the Mangyts?"

Nasreddin's bold, mischievous eyes gazed innocently at the old bek, the old hunter...

"How dare you talk like that to our glorious sovereign? You, son of a lowly potter?" Atabek Kara-Buton shouted from astride his horse, the hunting spear once again coming to life in his hands. "Maybe the blood of an impudent young boy can take the place of the tiger's blood... At any rate, your young blood won't escape into the mosquito-infested marsh! .."

"Oh, Light-of-the-Hunt. Oh, inexorable falcon-like Atabek Kara-Buton. It would be more simple to get a donkey's blood! .. Here, take my donkey al-Yahshur! He won't run away, won't slip through your fingers like a fish. He's old. Hurl your angry, righteous spear at him, only be careful not to miss, or else he'll pass foul air in your direction," Nasreddin replied, smiling.

"Leave him alone, Kara-Buton. He saved my life. He unwound the deadly Albasty spirit from my leg. The boy will come with me to the castle. I want to show him my gratitude... And I like the things he says... There should be one person in every kingdom who speaks the truth. Otherwise, the ruler will be bored. But no more than *one* person!

So come with me, young potter's son. Let's go..."

"But I have to bring some firewood home. My mother and father are sitting at home without a hearthfire. And they are so very old..."

"Kara-Buton will bring them wood as punishment for letting the tiger get away! Let the Atabek lead the donkey into the village as an admission of his shame for not having caught his prey, ha-ha! And you and I are off to the castle, Nasreddin. Oyez! But the blood, the blood got away! .. And we were so close, so close... But it got away, it is gone! .."

"It's not gone! " Kara-Buton whispered under his breath, and once again, his yellow fox-eyes, his deadly glance slid over Nasreddin's face. And once again, the gaze of those two arrow-eyes shot past Nasreddin's temples... For now, they only shot past, vanishing into the chill autumn sky... For now...

But Nasreddin kept smiling. Young. Willful. Slender. His shoulders stooped from having worked since childhood with axe and hoe... Nasreddin walked up to his donkey and hugged its warm, sagging neck.

"Al-Yahshur, let's go! We've been invited to the bek's castle, to Oftob-kala; it is a great honor! So, my dear bald-legged friend, let's go to the castle, even though I fear the charity and love of our ruler more than anything on Earth...

THE HAREM

*...Listen and learn, young man, while
your branches are yet brimming with
sap, and while your clay is yet pliant—
take on the imprint of the world.*

Sanai

It was said by the ancient Japanese poet: "I spent the night in the Emperor's bedchamber... But shivered nonetheless! "

It was already nightfall... An autumn night... Chilly... An uneasy, troubled, wolvine night... It is on such nights that the slithering, slinking wolves noiselessly enter the sleeping flocks of sheep... Revelling, cold-bloodedly, they nuzzle and sniff among the warm, pungent flock...

The bek's palace was ablaze with torches. It lay concealed behind high adobe walls... Carved wooden columns of the terrace... Heavy, carved pear-wood doors bearing Arabic inscriptions... Carpets from Isfahan, Fergana, Tekin, and China covering the walls and floors of the huge rooms... Scented Rangoon candles burning in bronze Damascus candelabras... Indian incense wafting from silver Maltese censers... Sweet, dark, honeyed smoke drifting and meandering through the rooms—its fragrance so intoxicating... The heady, cloying smell of incense permeating the palace...

Talgat-bek and Nasreddin had already been sitting at the low banquet table for quite some time... They had long since finished eating the sumptuous delicacies and were now reclining on cushions embroidered in fine Indian gold thread... They had long since grown tired of talking and sleep was beginning to overtake them... The court musicians and *hafiz* singers had long since grown hoarse, but they continued to play and sing, their voices fading and drifting off, sinking into the heavy, drowsy, night carpets... Their voices trailing off... Dissolving... Overcome by the aroma of sweet-smelling incense and hashish... The willowy harem dancers in their billowy Arabian costumes, transparent as the water of a mountain spring, lilted and swayed seductively around the banquet table, their eyes heavy with sleep and desire, their beautiful, slender legs sinking in the lush pile of the rugs... Their wanton breasts and hips sharply outlined by the limp silks, their limbs grown heavy and sleepy... Already...

Already, night had fallen!

Already, sleep was overtaking them!

Already, already, the holiday feast was fading and sinking into the thick, sleepy carpets, just as the violent, vernal, crystal downpour sinks and is absorbed into the sands of the riverbank...

And everywhere, the smoky, mellifluous, blissful aroma of incense and hashish sliding, slithering, meandering... Ah, yes...

Already!

Talgat-bek was already snoring...

His life was already sinking into the cushions and carpets...

But!

But Nasreddin was not asleep, not dozing. He watched as the last dancer slowly sank into the haze and mist of the carpet—succumbing to exhaustion, drifting off to sleep... Her billowy, silken harem pants quivering like the wings of an autumn butterfly dying in the cold, empty, frost-covered fields...

Oh, my butterfly, you have fluttered, fallen asleep, your wings now transparent and stiff on the autumn carpet-field. Fallen, wilted, sleeping, carried away by the lilting incense...

I quietly stood up from the rug and rose above the sweet-smelling mist which hovered at my feet. Carefully, I made my way through the sleeping revellers, who, having indulged their passions, lay like the dead! The poet Sheikh Rumi has said: "Do not give in to your passions... For then the horses will devour their riders! "

I thought that I was only whispering the words of this holy sage, but in fact, I was saying them quite loudly. It was the long night of constant imbibing that was speaking in me. As I was stepping over the sleeping bodies, Talgat-bek suddenly awoke... Either he had heard me talking or had heard from somewhere deep in the hazy mist of the carpets the big toe of my bare foot striking the string of a two-stringed *dutar*. The silent string had responded sharply, reverberating and echoing through the carpeted stillness of the palace.

Oh, foolish foot wallowing in the low-lying clouds of pleasure, my drunken, blind, unsteady, bare foot!

"I heard your words, young Nasreddin," Talgat-bek's hollow voice wafted up to me. "But the Prophet has said,

'One part of life belongs to Allah, and one part belongs to pleasure and feasts...' And also, 'Give rest to your hearts so that they may better remember Allah.'

"But beyond the walls of your palace reigns the impoverished wolvine night. An impoverished emirate, an impoverished land of impoverished villages and fields. And you drown and sink and sleep on drunken rugs..."

"What are you—a saint?.. A Sufi-dervish? Maybe you are the saint of Khorezm Sulan Vais who told Allah to give him the souls of all sinners for him to bring to salvation? Ha-ha! Perhaps I should give you a dervish's hat, a staff, and cup for begging... Ha-ha! Maybe you're a saint—haven't been with a woman yet? Maybe you still have dreams of quince..."

"No," said Nasreddin, bowing his head. "I haven't been... I still have ... dreams of quince... I, uh..."

"What?!" interrupted Talgat-bek. "So you're still a virgin? Oyez! Do you mean to tell me there is such a thing as a virgin youth in my land?! Oyez! Oyez! Come, my little blind Astrakhan lamb who hasn't had his tender first pelt taken off yet! Ha-ha! .. Let's go—come with me! "

"Where to?"

"To my harem! I have no use for it any more... All those nights—those sweet, ephemeral, blind nights of caressing and coupling have been replaced by long nights of meditation... Yes! The short nights of passion have been replaced by the interminable nights of meditation... Now let's go! "

"I don't want to go to another man's harem... I don't want to, I refuse! I want to go home to my elderly parents! I know they're sitting up waiting for me, my old mother Liapak-bibi and Mustapha-ata... Their myopic rheumy eyes are gazing out into the damp autumn night... Waiting for me... Mother has probably cooked a pot of lentils for me and wrapped it in a blanket to keep it warm. I want to go home... to sleep... What do I need a harem for? The bek's harem? What for?"

But Mahmud Talgat-bek dragged me through the endless, dark, sleepy corridors, rooms, terraces... His spidery hand grasping me firmly...

"Come, my son... Come, Nasreddin! ... I shall leave you in the harem the whole night through, and you will learn everything about the art of love ... in a single night... First, the old female-eunuchs will bathe and dress you in the pheasant-feather robe of love! ... My own favorite robe! For now I wear only the dark cloak of old age... Ah, the pheasant-feather robe! "

"Old women?! Bathing me?! Why, what for? What use have I for a feathered robe?"

"Didn't you know that pheasants mate only at night—like porcupines! "

"I want to go home. I want to go to sleep... The only ones I want to 'be' with are my parents! I'm neither a pheasant nor a porcupine! .. Let me go home, *domullo!* "

"Oh, no! .. Come on! You'll thank me in the morning! Go on... Or else, I'll order you clubbed to death! Go on! Oyez! "

And so I went. I was curious. But also frightened. What awaited me in the harem? What? Oyez!

....And then, two toothless, grinning hags were pouring warm musk-scented water out of big clay jugs over my skinny, naked body.

The walls of the bek's bathhouse were inlaid with tiles of lapis lazuli from Samarkand. I lay there squirming and thrashing like a fish on the wet, slippery marble bench, ornately painted with Mecca peacocks and strange, exotic flowers and heavenly houris.

I lay there... The abundant gentle water pouring over me...

The old women expertly rubbed, massaged, and kneaded my bony adolescent body...

I pressed my face against the cool marble...

I sank and drifted off to sleep, feeling as though I were running, sinking in the sunny rice paddies ... sweet, mint-green, tender rice fields...

I sank into the warm, sunny, mosquito-ridden rice-water... The fields lay right at the doorstep of my adobe hut, and I had often waded out into the sun-drenched water.

...Through the slippery, splashing sound of the water, I heard another sound—scratchy, menacing.

I opened my eyes: leaning over the marble bench, two old rapacious hags hovered over me, like vultures over carrion. Oyez! Holding long, thin, gleaming Damascus razors; silently, expertly, they shaved the hair off my wet body. First, my armpits, then my groin. My body became naked and smooth as a hen's egg...

"Oyez! Hey, old women, don't nick me! Don't hurt me! Cut the branches, but don't you dare touch the trunk. I don't want to become a eunuch!" I shouted, trying not to breathe or move lest the sharp razors cut me...

Through the steaming, musk-scented water, an old hag's face came looming out at me, a face like an ancient, worn-out tombstone, the toothless mouth—mumbling, whispering, smiling:

"Son! Young man! Why don't you become a eunuch? Then you'll have no worries or cares in life! Avicenna considered love a disease as serious as insomnia, mania or hydrophobia! Why should you languish and suffer? From the looks of you, I can tell you that you will succumb to the disease! Since you're endowed like a mule, you'll wind up leading a mule's life," she said with a sigh, glancing sadly at my body.

"No," I cried. "I want to suffer from this disease! Take away your razors at once!"

I jumped up from the marble bench and out of reach of the deadly razors. "I want to suffer from this incurable disease!"

Then the old women wrapped me in a thin Zandani blanket and groomed my hair with a wondrous walnut comb. Finally they rubbed my smooth lithe skin with rose oil...

And again I sank into the sweet sleepy dreams of sunny rice fields; I sank into the water all around...

The golden quince bird clings to the rough, golden, fragrant late-ripening quince fruit, touches it, watches it fall...

The sleepy bird clings to the sleepy, ripe fruit. Clings to it, beats it, the silent golden quince bird... Fiery bird of night!

Two old hags with long, burning Damascus razors in their hands run toward me in my quiet, sheltering, emerald rice fields...

I awake with a scream...

Mahmud Talgat-bek and Nasreddin walk through the cloistered, misty rooms of the harem.

They stop before the first door, carved of cherry wood...

Nasreddin wears the bright pheasant-feather robe, the night-robe of love...

"Pheasants couple only at night! Sacred birds! Only at night! " the words rang in Nasreddin's maddened head...

Talgat-bek noiselessly opens the cherry wood door. "Enter, my son. This is the first ruby room of seclusion... Oyez! My Ruby! "

The ruby room was filled with ruby carpets ... ruby candelabra ... ruby blankets ... a ruby Bukhara bed under a ruby canopy...

And on the rustling satin sheets reclined a child, a little girl, a young woman with hair ruby from Persian henna and basma... The woman was sleeping, her breathing softly blowing, flowing, going over drowsy ruby satin...

Nasreddin gazes at the sleeping beauty...

Whose daughter was she? Perhaps her mother and father are waiting for her, too, keeping her pot of lentils warm in a blanket, peering into the dark, deserted, wolvine night.

"Wake her! " croaks Talgat-bek, punching Nasreddin in the side with his withered fist. "Wake her, and she will awaken you! Ha-ha! "

"No. I do not like ruby, the color of blood... When I see the ram killed and his blood flows before me, I will not partake of the meat... Or is there but a single room of seclusion in your harem, my sovereign?" said Nasreddin with a smile,

wrapping the enormous pheasant-feather robe tighter around his thin body...

"Ha-ha-ha! What would that be—a harem of one room? Like an army of one soldier, my boy! Let us go to the emerald room! "

...Do not give reign to your passions, for then the horses shall devour their riders... The horses of passion shall devour their riders...

Devour them! Will they?

But beyond the walls of the castle of Oftob-kala, the chilly autumn night dragged on...

...On such nights the slithering, slinking wolves noiselessly enter the sleeping flocks of sheep sheltered safely in their warm folds... Revelling, cold-bloodedly, they nuzzle and sniff among the warm, pungent flock... If grabbed by the tail, they will not feel it, for they smell only blood, the dense, submissive blood of the lambs! Deafened, drunken, and blinded by the smell of blood... As Sheikh Saadi has said: "Death takes us one by one like sheep from the flock..." And it is said...

Two old hags with long, burning Damascus razors in their hands run toward me across my quiet, soft, emerald rice fields... They run and run and are bogged down in the sleepy water...

The emerald room was filled with carpets and rugs of grass ... finely-wrought emerald candelabra from Baghdad... blankets and pillows of emerald satin ... and an emerald bed of pear wood under an emerald canopy...

On it lay a woman under covers of emerald meadows... A young woman, a little girl, a child... Her unquiet dreams were fragile and easily broken. So she crossed, and tossed, and turned on the blankets. And her emerald hair, the color of Indian mint, tumbled from the bed and almost reached the floor... Like the head of a chicken being carried home from the bazaar by its bound legs...

And the wavy green blankets so like the sharp watery green of my rice fields...

"Raise her head... Don't wake her... Enter her as she sleeps like a wolf making his way into the sleeping flock! Her name is Emerald! She is like the soft transparent grass that grows by the river in May... Go into the grass, lay upon the tender, caressing grass, Nasreddin! Go, wolf! Go—the sacrificial lamb awaits you! Oyez! Take off the pheasant-feather robe of night! " whispered Talgat-bek, panting. He was tired from the wine and the sleepless night, from old age and the memory of his young years... He was tired of life...

Wheezing and panting in languish...

But he wants to help me...

"Go, wolf, go... The lamb awaits you! "

"No, *muallim*, no, my teacher... The pleasure the wolf knows eating a lamb is nothing in comparison to the delight of the lamb when it feasts on the tender grasses..."

"Are you afraid, lad, or is it that you don't like Emerald?"

"Have you only two rooms in your harem, then?" I asked, trying once again to outwit the bek, but this time he was not to be fooled.

"Oyez! I also have Diamond. She's in the diamond room! And then there's Goldie in the gold room! And many others, but you are trying to trick me, my little pheasant-robed friend! Now I understand: you're still a virgin and you're afraid! Ha-ha! Look, I'll show you how it's done, my little lamb, my little bird! Ha-ha! Look! I'm a wolf! Watch me take off the robe of old age. Good. Now I'm wearing only my white silken Sassanid shirt. I'll drink pomegranate juice from this jug. Watch, Nasreddin! Watch me and learn. Take it all in while your branch is still brimming with sap. While your clay is yet pliant, take on the imprint of the world! "

"But not the imprint of the harem beds, teacher! Learning of love in a harem is like shooting partridges in a cage. What's the sense of it?" I answered quietly, but the bek was no longer listening to me.

He was drinking the red juice.

He looked so old... His snow-white beard was the color of his Sassanid shirt...

And the horses of passion will devour their riders... But will they really?

Mahmud Talgat-bek, why have you taken off the peaceful robe of old age? Why has your face, flushed with weak stagnant blood, suddenly turned dark, then bright red like the ruby-red room? You're in the emerald green room, but your face has turned ruby-red... Why?

"Wait, *muallim*! Don't! Why are you doing this?"

...The decrepit, blind wolf with his yellowed crumbling fangs creeps among the young flock ... poking his deaf snout into the strong, firm, virgin rumps of the lambs...

Why?

Why is the rich red juice flowing, streaming, gushing and spilling all over your snow-white robe and pearly beard?

Why has the jug slipped noiselessly from your numb red fingers onto the meadow-green carpets? And why, though the jug has fallen from your hands, does the red juice keep flowing down the front of your shirt and beard... The thick red juice...

"*Muallim*, it isn't juice at all! It is blood that is flowing from your mouth, *muallim*..."

And suddenly he shouted in a hoarse, pitiful voice:

"My son, Nasreddin! Look, I'll show you how! You little virgin lamb! Ha-ha! I still have time. I can do it! "

"No you can't, *muallim*... Your time has run out... Why are you doing this?"

Why, indeed?

Why do you fall before reaching the bed?

Fall, fall forever...

His pearly white Sassanid robe was drenched in blood...

The billowy, heavy robe...

Mahmud Talgat-bek in his heavy, ruby-red, wet, sticky robe.

Why, *muallim*, why?

Why did you cast off the peaceful dark robe of old age for this final blood-stained garb?

Why?

And the horses of passion will devour their riders...

And they did...

SUKHEIL!

*...When you see her, and she
speaks to you, and when you
hear her voice, then...*

*...The mule ran away, dragging
the rope behind him...*

from Kabus-Nameh

Oyez!

I bent over Mahmud Talgat-bek's body, lifted his heavy wizened head, and tried rubbing his soft temples, but his head drooped and fell out of my arms onto the thick carpet...

The head was heavy, distant, silent... Growing dim... Fading... Like the cobra's head...

Oyez! I lifted his intoxicated head, lifted it up off this last rug, and began massaging his dead temples.

"*Muallim*, don't... Why, *muallim*, why?"

But the fallen fruit cannot be put back upon the cool, slippery, autumn branches...

Gently and carefully I lowered Talgat-bek's head to the rug, putting a satin pillow under it—as though he had need of such a thing. But I knew he didn't need anything any more. Mahmud Talgat-bek had no needs... None... Not anymore...

And then I ran and ran through the dark, sleepy, fragrant rooms of the harem... I ran and ran in my flowing pheasant-feather robe... I tripped on the hems: it was tangled about my legs... I stumbled and fell... I could not tear off the stupid, senseless robe, for I was completely naked underneath...

So on I ran...

Oyez... I left the harem untouched, unused...

Opening the heavy, wrought-iron gates, I ran out into the orchard!

What bliss! What joy! The cool spicy smell of the fallen autumn leaves hit my numb, intoxicated nostrils... The pure, cool spirit of autumn flowed and wafted to my nostrils... Into my very soul! After all those heavy, feverish aromas and incense! How refreshing... Like cool spring water... Like sinking into an icy mountain stream!

I ran through the orchard, sinking in the fallen leaves. I ran, breathing in the cool air... And began to awaken...

Dawn had come to the orchard. A bluish-gray mist was wafting, meandering through the dim outlines of the trees... A thin, damp mist... But something golden was flitting about in this chilly, early-morning mist...

What was it? What was it glittering through the sleepy mist? I kept on running, but I caught something golden glittering, glittering out of the corner of my eye... It seemed alive! Fleishy and alive! Glittering! Smouldering! Like the heads of the young harem women. Wearing a gold-embroidered Kokand headdress, flashing, hiding, floating, wavering in the thick flowing fog... Like golden, late-autumn sunflowers, full and ripe, floating, weaving through the mist... Indistinct... Shimmering... Golden...

Then I stopped and stood quite still among the misty trees. I stood too still... And the damp, early-morning orchard breeze came rushing in dispelling, scattering, chasing away the purple mist.

The mist cleared, and the golden quince orchard appeared around me. Abundant, rich, heavy with fruit were the trees. Chilly... Alive... The leaves had all fallen to the ground, muffling, burying the grass... But the fragrant golden quince fruit hung from the frost-covered branches as though it

were alive... Like thousands of glittering golden spheres... Fragrant... There were no longer any leaves left on the trees... They had all fallen to the ground... But the fruit had not yet been plucked... The naked fruit hung from the bare branches, the bare, leafless branches... Not yet gathered, not yet plucked, not taken...

I knew that some people left the fruit on the branches until the first December snows... And the naked golden quince would glitter in the first pure pearly snow... Golden fruit, warm and alive in the snow-covered trees! Oyez! O, yes! But I had never eaten such fragrant golden fruit off snow-covered branches... Only the rich could afford to leave the fruit to ripen until the coming of winter. The poor eat the fruit while it is still green, hard, and sour... Yes...

But the orchard of naked golden quinces swayed heavily all around me in the early-morning breeze...

“What are you doing in our orchard, *aka*?”

Oyez! What is that? Whose voice is that? Or am I hearing things? Perhaps I’m dreaming...

Oh my, is it possible?

Or was it simply the golden, overripe quince hanging from its tired, heavy-laden branches? Was I imagining things? Dreaming? Oyez!

Nasreddin froze dead in his tracks... Alert as an animal sensing danger. Another animal... Standing stock-still, waiting ... in his ridiculous, flowing harem robe... Tall, skinny, slouching... Looking so silly...

He stood, glancing about... But there was nothing save the plump, golden, overripe fruit swaying in the damp breeze... The mist was already beginning to dissipate...

“Who are you, *aka*? Why are you wearing my father’s robe?”

Oyez! A voice! A maiden’s voice, clear as spring water.

The voice of my icy cold stream in the mountain pass of the plane trees... A tinkling voice like a chirping bird, flying, weaving... A voice as light as the leaf of a wild mountain plum, gently floating down to me...

Where was the voice coming from? Where?

I looked about, but there was no one on the misty ground ... on the fallen leaves ... or behind the trunks of the golden trees... No one...

"Aka! ... Why are you spinning about like a tethered calf?.."

Then I threw my head back, craning my neck to see... And the first thing that caught my eye was a pair of red Moroccan leather slippers... Then a long white gown of brocade sewn in seed pearls... Then two eyes like dark, smoky-gray Bukhara plums.

Two fresh plums among the quince fruit! Oh my, yes!

There, in the cold autumn branches, among the naked quince fruit, sat a girl, a maiden... In the branches, among the fruit... Oyez! Like a green vernal fruit she sat among the golden, overripe quince...

The silent, golden quince bird clung to the golden, fragrant quince, the autumn quince... A drowsy bird clinging to the drowsy ripe fruit! The noiseless quince-bird, herself golden among the golden fruit.

A fiery, golden bird!

"What is your name, oh Green Vernal Fruit of the Autumn Tree?"

"Sukheil! "

...Sukheil, The Southern Star. Star of the distant desert where the one-humped camels roam. Oh, light of the lonely desert! Oh, happy star of Yemen! Sukheil! Sukheil! Samum! Oh, dry wind! Oh, arid wind! ... Our adobe hut

stands at the edge of the village where the sand storms of the Kara Kum Desert rage. And when the dry, arid Samum comes, its dark flying sands bury our adobe hut and our poor little yard, and our small emerald-green rice field. The blind, silent, shifting, swirling night sands swoop down on us...

Sukheil! Sukheil! The dry sand storm swoops down and covers my rice field! And I stumble through the dry sands that have buried my green rice shoots!

Sukheil! Sukheil! The dry, arid sands bury my crops, my poor, poor crops!

Sukheil! Sukheil! And my crops perish!

And two old hags with their glistening Damascus razors crawl along through the rice field, staggering, sinking, sinking in the sands! Oyez!

"Who are you, *aka*?"

"I am Nasreddin... Son of Mustapha-*bobo* the potter."

"And I am the daughter of Mahmud Talgat-bek..."

"What are you doing up in that tree?"

"I love to sleep in the golden quince trees! ... I've had them put a wooden bench up here for me... I'm a quince bird! When I sleep here, the dreams of golden quince come to me! I dream that I am a golden quince bird! Nasreddin-*aka*, why can't people fly?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because rice grows only here on the ground. And the hoe is too heavy to fly with after all..."

"Nasreddin-*aka*, do you have dreams of golden quince?"

"Yes, I do..."

"Nasreddin-*aka*, why are you licking your lips? Are you thirsty?"

"Yes, Sukheil, I am... My mouth is parched like the desert... And my head is also parched," Nasreddin added quietly, unable to take his eyes off the beautiful maiden with her large, plum-like eyes and full lips, swollen like a river... He could not stop looking at her small, delicate head which darted and turned in its golden quince cap like the head of a tiny bird.

"Have a quince fruit... Here, catch! "

"No, I don't want quince... It will make my mouth even more parched... It is too sticky sweet. I will drink from the ditch instead..."

My mouth was dry as the desert sands from the sleepless night and the rich Samarkand wine, made from bittersweet dried grapes...

Sukheil! Sukheil! The desert wind is destroying my poor, pitiful crops! And the sand dunes are burying the emerald-green rice field...

I lifted the hem of the flowing pheasant-feather robe and leaned over the ditch.

"Nasreddin-aka, Nasreddin-aka! " the anxious leaf-voice fluttered down to me from the tree.

"Don't drink from the ditch! It's irrigation water—not for drinking! The deadly *rishta*-worm lives in the canal water. He'll get inside you and destroy you! "

"Like love! " I whispered, lowering my parched lips to the dark, stagnant water to drink...

"Don't drink it! The worm! Nasreddin-aka! "

Sukheil gracefully climbed down from the tree, knocking dozens of golden quince from their branches on the way. She ran up to me, grabbing me by the shoulder with her supple, willowy hands, trying to pull me away from the water.

"Don't, don't, Nasreddin-aka! ... Don't drink it! The water is dirty... The *rishta*-worm lives in the irrigation water! "

And the golden quince softly fell to the ground, onto the dewy, fallen leaves... The heavy, overripe quince.

But I drank anyway, unable to resist even this brackish water... I drank, but the arid desert did not leave my mouth...

A few quince had fallen into the ditch and floated right by my lips...

I looked at Sukheil and she returned my glance... We gazed into each other's eyes for an eternity... I drank the water and gazed at her.

She was wearing a garnet necklace around her slender, swan-like neck. The flame of the dark beads glowed and burned in the morning light.

And the sands kept burying my emerald-green rice field...
My tender rice field...

I drank from the ditch, unable to quench my thirst, my eyes unable to sate their desire to gaze into hers...

Suddenly, Sukheil lithely bent down over the water, her coal-black braids and garnet beads falling into the water. And Sukheil began to drink the dirty water... And as she drank, her dark, reproachful eyes gazed into mine... Pleading...

"Oyez! What are you doing, Sukheil? Don't! Don't drink the water! You'll swallow the *rishta*-worm! Don't do it, Sukheil!" I rushed over to her and pulled her away from the brackish water. "Did you drink it, Sukheil?"

"Yes, I must have drunk a whole bucketful," she replied with a smile.

"Why?"

"Well, you were drinking it, *aka*, and I wanted to drink with you..."

She was standing beside me now, her breathing light and inaudible... her large, plum-eyes gazing into mine...

I took her by her wet braids, while she did nothing but gaze steadily into my eyes...

And then I kissed her. I kissed her submissive, sweetly-parted lips, and she continued to gaze silently at me...

Her lips smelled of the ditch water, the delicious water of the ditch... She continued to gaze at me, silently...

And the sands, the vast whirling sand dunes buried my poor rice field, my emerald-green rice field, my sacred rice field...

And the two old hags with burning Damascus razors in

their hands came chasing after me. But then they began to lag behind, to sink up to their necks in the wonderful shifting sand... They sank up to their necks...

"Sukheil, I love you! "

Suddenly, a huge heavy quince fell off one of the top branches, hit Nasreddin on the head, and rolled off into the fallen leaves.

The blow hurt, and Nasreddin's eyes filled with tears, but he just smiled and rubbed the bump on his head.

"The fruit has ripened and now it's dropping from the branches. It is ripe, even overripe, just like me..."

"Me, too," agreed Sukheil as another fruit fell down, this time hitting her on the head.

"Are you hurt, Sukheil?"

"No, not at all, Nasreddin-aka."

"How I love you, o daughter of the bek..."

"And I love you, my potter's son..."

And the golden fleshy fallen quince bobbed and floated down the ditch...

The golden water...

But!

"Oyez! What is happening? Who is tearing me away from Sukheil, from her tender lips? Who is doing this?"

The yellow, darting fox-eyes of Atabek Kara-Buton were staring down at me, his thin lips distorted with fury, his breath reeking of stale wine and burned mutton. I turned away from the beastly, predatory eyes, and the foul smell of alcohol and decaying flesh...

And once again the two falcon-arrows shot past my own trusting rabbit-eyes! Again!

The atabek was holding a short Turkish whip with silver tips on the end of each thong.

He tried to lash me in the face, but even though I was

standing motionless before him, he missed.

I gazed only at Sukheil, her dark garnet necklace and her smoky-gray eyes...

I gazed only at her full, swollen lips. Our swollen rivers...

And gazing at her, I smelled the sweet aroma of the water from the clay ditch...

Sukheil, Sukheil ... the infinite desert sands have buried my poor, meager crops...

I stood still as Kara-Buton flayed at me, cutting, ripping and tearing with his cruel whip! He kept trying to lash me in the face, to put out my eyes with the sharp silver tips at the ends of the thongs... He wanted to gouge out my eyes... My burning, innocent eyes... So that I should no longer be able to gaze at my beloved Sukheil!

He kept trying to lash my face, but I stood fast and neither felt nor heard his frenzied blows. I saw only Sukheil, while the atabek kept trying to rip my eyes out...

He kept pacing around me... Weaving to and fro, towering over me... Approaching... Taking aim... But always missing my eyes! I pitied this poor old hunter... The Turkish whip whistled through the air... Tearing at me ... ripping my harem robe to shreds... Leaving my body exposed—naked, innocent, ripe...

"Sukheil, Sukheil, I love you! I love you, I love you! ..." I repeated over and over again, smiling under the merciless blows of the whip...

"You dirty little beggar! You miserable good-for-nothing! I'll beat you to death! I'll gouge your lascivious eyes out! " Kara-Buton shrieked hoarsely. He was old and began to tire. I pitied him, the aged hunter...

The silver tips of the whip missed my eyes... The whip had grown tired... So tired... Oyez!

Suddenly Sukheil rushed up to the atabek, grabbed him by the beard, and started scratching and clawing his face.

"Do not harm him! Leave Nasreddin alone! I hate you, atabek! I'll tell my father! Father, Father! Help! "

"You don't have a father any more! Your father is lying

in the harem, dead! I'm your father now! Now I'm your master! Ha-ha! As soon as the period of mourning is over, I shall make you my wife! My unripe little apricot with the sweet, moist, young pit! I shall eat your pit with relish! Ha-ha! How I love unripe apricots! The sweet pit, so cool against my body! "

With his free hand, Kara-Buton roughly jerked her away from him by her long wet braids...

The tears flowed from her plum-eyes... Tears of pain... She gazed at me sadly, her moist eyes begging and pleading...

Why was I just standing there? I, Nasreddin, who from the age of five had wielded the axe and hoe...

Why was I just standing there like the old withered Chinese elm of the crowding ants, while the atabek dragged my Sukheil by the hair like a steppe horse drags the victim tied to his tail? He dragged her off, laughing all the way...

The dark little bird's head turned to me.

"*Aka*, run! Run! He'll kill you! .. Run, *aka*, run! "

Oyez! Finally I came out of my stupor, and running up to the atabek, I threw myself at him, struck the back of his head with my fist in a mighty blow. Pounding as my father Mustapha-*ata* did to stun the frisky spring bulls. When the village peasants could not manage the playful young bulls, they would call on Mustapha-*ata* for help. And with a single powerful blow, he would knock the bulls to the ground... And, thus stilled, they would lie in the grass for a long time, wilted and quiet... Mustapha-*ata*'s hands were like heavy clay... The clay hands of a potter...

I struck the atabek with my fist as though he, too, were a playful spring bull. His eyes grew dim, forgetful. He tumbled into the ditch, his head drooping. He let go of Sukheil's braids, and grew soft, malleable, heavy, drowsy...

His eyes grew dim, bleary, dull... Distant... Pitiful... As pitiful as a wounded old beast...

He sat in the ditch, his head bowed as though he were asleep. The golden quince fruit floated and bobbed around him...

"Run, *aka*! .. Hurry! .. Soon the mercenary guards will come! They will beat you to death with their whips, *aka*! Quick, run! "

"Hurry! " she cried, plum-eyes pleading with him to go...

Nasreddin wrapped the flowing harem robe around him ... the torn, tattered robe... His lean, bony body showing through the holes... Innocent... Crimson from the burning lashes of the whip.

But Nasreddin only smiled...

"Sukheil! .. Sukheil! .. I shall return soon... I shall return... To drink from the ditch..."

"And I, too, shall drink the ditch water... We shall drink together."

"I shall return soon! Soon! Soon! Wait for me, Sukheil! "

"The water will flow, *aka*, and Sukheil will wait... The water flows... Sukheil waits..."

"I love you, daughter of the bek..."

"And I love you, potter's son..."



THE CONTRIBUTORS

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Born in 1934 in the city of Isfara. He graduated from the Dushanbe Teacher's College with a degree in philology in 1958 and got a job in journalism. He has been publishing since the 1960s and is the author of several volumes of short stories and plays which deal, for the most part, with the moral problems of the contemporary world.

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Born in 1945 in Leninabad into the family of an office worker. In 1967, he received a degree in philology from the Lenin State University of Tajikistan. He has worked as an editor for radio and television, and for *Tojikistoni Soveti* (Soviet Tajikistan), the republic's central newspaper. He began publishing in 1966, and since then, more than a hundred of his short stories and sketches of World War II heroes and the peacetime successes of the Tajik people have appeared in print.

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Born in 1939 in Nurata Region near Samarkand into the family of a teacher. In 1962, he received a degree in philology from Kirov Teacher's College in Leninabad. After graduation, he began a career in journalism and now writes both prose and poetry, gaining prominence in the former in recent years. Firuz's short stories and novellas generally deal with the moral and ethical problems that face the youth of today.

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Born in Samarkand in 1928 into the family of a teacher. He is a literary scholar and critic, a prosaist and playwright. Hadi-zade earned his doctorate in philology and wrote many

articles on the history of classical and Soviet Tajik literature, dealing with the works of specific writers in his abundant criticism. A thorough knowledge of his people's past provided fertile ground for the historical novels, novellas, short stories, plays, and screen plays which make up the body of his creative efforts.

JALIL, RAHIM

Novelist, playwright and poet. The son of a cobbler, he was born in 1909 in Khodjent (now Leninabad). He was trained as a teacher and for some time taught in school. In 1931 he took up a journalistic job. His first work was published in 1930, and his most popular novels are *Pulat and Gulru*, *Sharab* and *Heart's Abode*. He is People's Writer of Tajikistan, winner of the Rudaki Prize.

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Born in 1928 in Samarkand in the family of a book-binder. In 1962, he graduated from the Higher Literary Courses in Moscow and later edited the Tajik satirical weekly *Khorpushtak* (Hedgehog). He was for a time secretary of the Tajik Writers' Union.

His first work appeared in print in the 1950s, since then he has published *Corner Room* and *A House on the Outskirts* for which he received the Rudaki Prize. Subsequent works include *Bilei-Zainab* and *A Trip to the Netherworld or a Story of the Great Hoja*, and many short stories and features about the Tajikistan of today and contemporary problems.

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Born in 1924 in Samarkand into the family of a cobbler. After he graduated from high school, he went to work on a collective farm. Subsequently, in 1952, he received a degree in language and literature from the Samarkand Teacher's College. He has worked as a schoolteacher and a correspondent for a Tajik republic newspaper. He has had many collections of short stories and novellas published, beginning in

1953. He generally writes about village and rural people and the lives of the young.

RABIEV, ABDUROFE

Born in 1951 in the village of Mehnatabad. In 1975, he graduated from the Lenin State University of Tajikistan with a degree in philology. Since then, he has worked as a journalist, first as a correspondent for Tajik radio, then for the republic's central newspaper *Tojikistoni Soveti* (Soviet Tajikistan). He has travelled all over the republic with his notepad, collecting material for literary reflections. The heroes of Abdurofe Rabiev's tales are actual people engaged in building Soviet Tajikistan today.

SADYK, HODJI

Born in 1913 in the city of Kanibadam. His father was a craftsman. After graduating from a high school of music, he tried his wings in literature, and, in 1936, began his career in journalism. His first publications appeared in the 1930s. Generally, he prefers to work in the genre of satirical or humorous short stories, many of which are directed against anachronistic remnants of the past in the lives and consciousness of his people.

Hodji Sadyk is a veteran of World War II.

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Born in 1940 in the village of Amondar to the family of a collective farmer. In 1963, he graduated from the Lenin State University of Tajikistan with a degree in philology. Sorbon first appeared in print in 1965. His first collection of short stories, *Not All Has Been Said*, came out in 1969. Many of his short stories rapidly gained in popularity, including "The First Day of School" about a Tajik woman during World War II; "A Defense of Stone" and "Gypsy" about rural life; "Once Upon a Time" about the establishment of Soviet power in the river valley of the Zeravshan; and "Greatcoat" about a boy who lost his father in the war.

The writer gained an enviable reputation in Tajik prose in the 70s.

TOLIS, PULAT (PULATOV TOLSTOY)

Born in 1929 in Leninabad into the family of a teacher. After he graduated from high school, he worked as a typesetter and linotypist at a print shop. Then he became a journalist and the editor of the literary journal *Sadok shark* (Voice of the East). His first short stories appeared in 1946. In his short life (Tolis died in 1961) he made a significant contribution to the development of realistic prose in Tajikistan. He is the author of several collections of short stories and two novellas (*Youth* and *Summer*). The heroes of his works are young workers, collective farmers, members of the rural and urban intelligentsia, and students. Most of his works are subtle psychological studies of the burning issues of family life, morality, and human existence.

TURSUN, SATTOR

Born in 1946 into the family of a collective farmer in the village of Poisurkhi. In 1970, he graduated from the University of Tajikistan with a degree in Oriental languages. He is presently an editor at *Sadok Shark* (Voice of the East) magazine. Tursun began writing during his student years, and his first short story, "On the Road", appeared in 1967. Since then, he has written several books and many short stories and novellas that shed light on his contemporaries—the collective farmers and workers of his native Tajikistan.

ULUG-ZODA, SATYM

Born in 1911 in the village of Varzik into the family of a poor peasant. In 1929, he graduated from the Tajik Institute of Public Education and then taught Tajik literature at his alma mater. Later, he became a journalist, then was elected secretary and finally chairman of the board of the Tajik Writer's Union. He fought in World War II and was

subsequently elected a corresponding member of the Tajik Academy of Sciences. Ulug-zoda began his literary career as a critic, but from the end of the 30s spent most of his time on drama and prose. He has written with equal success on historical themes (the historical plays *Rudaki*, *Avicenna*, and *His Majesty's Ambassador*, and the epic novel *Vose*) and about contemporary world (the plays *In the Flame* and *Treasure Hunters*, the novellas *Worthy Friends* and *The Morning of Our Lives*, and the novel *Earth Reborn*, and others).

ZULFIKAROV, TIMUR

Poet and novelist. He was born in 1936 in Dushanbe to a family of Oriental scholars. Graduated from the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow in 1961 and began to appear in print in the 1960s. He is the author of *Mushfiki's Childhood*, *Revelations of Omar Khayyam* and *Hodja Nasreddin's First Love*. He is also the author of several scenarios, of which one, *The Man Goes After the Birds*, was awarded the Silver Peacock Prize at the International Film Festival in Delhi. The author's prose is noted for its novelty of form and originality of style.

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